

Petrified of who you are (and who you have become)

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Petrified of who you are (and who you have become)

by [Dualogical](#), [overthink_it](#)

Summary

There it was, on the screen. A simple icon in black and white. A stylized heart, a dagger piercing it through without blood. It had not been there the day before.

Or

The Princesses find a certain game, and try to piece together what happened.

Notes

This started as a very crack-y concept, but 'Follow the leader' exists for a reason so let me be the first to do this in this fandom! It started as an amalgamation of ideas of different people, but I can't promise it will go the way you think.

- Dua

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

- Inspired by [Careful What You Damage](#) by [CheeseAndCake](#)

Chapter 1: I ponder of something great

Chapter Summary

On the screen, lives are changed, destinies unmet, the clock keeps ticking.
this fic has [a discord server](#)
and [a tvtropes page!](#)

How long was a day, in comparison to eternity?

That was a fundamentally unanswerable question, on multiple levels, not least of all being how it relied on relativity devoid of any other context to base itself on. Too many directions to take it in; was eternity composed of infinite days, or was eternity just a single day that never ended? Equally meaningless rhetorical questions with equally meaningless answers.

How about this: how did an incomprehensible scale of time doing nothing beyond watching your prison crumble around you... compare to your first few weeks in the outside world?

Now *that* was a question the former Princess, not that her title meant much of anything, could begin to answer. In fact, she already had. For two months, eleven days, and counting, that was the question she spent her time seeking the answer to. The things she'd been denied, the freedoms she'd never known, and the people like her she'd been dropped into these circumstances with.

Questions beget questions. It was hard to ignore the implications of the final item of that list. Harder, still, to justify to herself why she'd been waiting so long to ask what'd plagued her mind the moment she woke up.

How did I get here?

Thrice over now. First in the basement, a chain around her wrist; then again, a shackle at her neck; and finally, nothing binding her at all. She could still feel the phantom weight of it, even if the escalating pattern was broken; she brushed her hand against her neck, feeling the cool skin there, just to shake it off. The need to investigate everything had burned her companion once, she was not going to repeat his mistake.

Said companion was not with her now, but he was far from missing. She did not know his precise location, but she'd understood from the others that he was with... the others. The boys. Whereas her and the other girls she'd... (shared a common origin with?) (knew nothing about?) (identified with on their lack of identity?) ...started living with, had taken to an absolute mansion of a house, the others had needed to seek out a place to live.

That was how one was found, by a twin-horned athlete of a woman, who sought him out like a purpose; with legs which ran to her man and pushed them both off the ground. She'd come back from that encounter satiated, wearing a grin and eyes which sparkled like violence. That was how one of theirs had *been* found, by a perfumed picture of a man, who sought her out like a need; with hands which grasped his girl by the waist and pulled her into an embrace. She'd come back from that encounter flustered, with a smile and eyes which shone like tears.

They, the both of them, mutually spoke of those individual encounters with great enthusiasm. "He was everything I remembered him to be," they'd said.

This place they lived was grandiose. Large. It seemed to grow larger by the day. There were stairs and hallways here she, in the time she'd spent living here, not quite yet explored fully. There were people living here she sometimes felt she recognized, and other times were just strangers to her. She could make observations, but digging deeper was a harder chore.

They did not know how this house had electricity or running water. Much like, when Damiana came back from a date with her boy, she was not sure where the money she'd been gifted had came from. It was, like many other mysteries, just one of those things that they didn't talk about.

What they had there was nice. What they had there was awful. What they had there was stable. What they had there was unsustainable for the long term. A constellation of contradictions that gave her a headache on a good day.

It wasn't a question she, or anyone else, had the means to answer. They took to other questions, easier questions, to distract themselves. Questions like, "*who am I?*" which were then broken down further into the first question she'd ever been asked: "*what's my name?*"

They couldn't all go by "Princess," after all.

And identities, here, were worth more than an awkward introduction; they had documents to forge.

Some of them had been easier to corral into compliance than others. The wild girl with fangs and a lashing tail behind her had all but stalked Tabitha until she could get her alone to join in on the scheme, only to be avoidant and dismissive regarding the name she'd like for herself. It was an odd dance between feigned disinterest and insistent interrogation before Tabitha had finally gotten the name "Winnie" from her.

"But you better not be taking it," 'Winnie' had hissed at her, after, glancing behind her as if expecting someone to have been eavesdropping on their private conversation. "It's *mine* to keep; it's bad manners not to give what you borrow back."

Tabitha had given up on ever learning what 'Winnie' was short for. She'd suggested Winnifred and the catlike girl had twisted her face in as if she'd sucked on a lemon. She was just 'Winnie.' She'd had to fill in a placeholder for the surname. But that was the case for the most of them.

As far as aggression and straightforwardness was concerned, the twin-horned woman had 'Winnie' beat. But her decisiveness left much to be desired. The most she'd come up with was in retaliation to Tabitha's suggestions, crossed-armed and defensive. "There's no way my real name is going to be something long like '*Adelheide*,'" she'd mocked as she rolled her eyes, then shook her head and walked off, insulted by the very idea.

'How about you try coming up with names for ten people whose only known trait is a title of nobility, then?' She'd thought to retort, hours later. And then been laughed at for her pitiful reaction time. And *still* given no name to work with.

As for her, she'd chosen her name weeks ahead of the rest: Tabitha, going by the sheer amount of times she had been confused with the character of the upcoming movie, *Scarlet Hollow*. Or was it a series of movies? She was not completely sure.

From what she had seen of the trailers, it would be good. Maybe she could convince one of the others to join her. They could make popcorn.

She'd floated the idea to one of the other girls, the gentlest of them all, some time ago. Now, *she* was trying to convince *Tabitha* of something. A first for her.

They were sitting on a very comfortable couch, in a living room that was not big enough for ten people, but it did try its best. It was better at some times and worse at others; for now, with most of them distracted and in other rooms, its effort was commendable. Beyond the girls themselves, it contained wine colored couches, a brown coffee table, a TV that had to be stolen from somewhere, and a computer on the corner. Thelka was currently occupying the device, staring at something intently.

There were many of the residents in the house that gave Tabitha the creeps, but Thelka was on the list of 'on thin ice.' She was taller than the horned one by a few centimeters, she had an ego the size of the house, and her compromising skills could really use some refining.

According to her, her name was chosen for its meaning. "*Divine glory*." Tabitha counted that as Exhibit A on all three charges.

But she was not the Tabi was speaking with at the moment. She clarified the request she'd made. "So, you want to be twins on paper?"

"Yes! Damiana and Tabitha has a nice ring to it! I think," the newly named Damiana agreed, a smile in her voice even if Tabitha couldn't verify if it'd matched itself on her face.

She could tell that the girl— no, *woman* behind her was making a definite effort to be the light in others' lives, bringing up the mood. But of course, pleasing others all the time was bound to be taxing.

She let Damiana keep braiding her hair. Experimenting with new styles so they could feel even more distinct from their roommates had surely been an experience. Thinking on it, she would not mind it if her and Damiana matched. They looked alike already, and it didn't bother her like all the other odd coincidences in her life did; if anything, it was a comfort. Why not lean into it?

“Tabi and Dami, huh?” the woman with metal bones, of all things, commented as she passed them on the way to the kitchen. Her voice was shrill like grating metal, and about as loud as it too with a smile about as wide as her face.

Either 'Dami' got to her, or she got herself a pixie cut... With those split ends, Tabitha was willing to bet it was self-inflicted. Damiana would never let herself get away with work that was anything less than perfect, especially if it was for someone else.

“But,” Razor, as she still insisted to be called even though that was not an actual name, leaned over the back of the couch. “Who’s the older one? That’s a pretty important question.”

“That’d be me,” Tabitha said.

“Me. I am,” Dami said.

Both girls glanced at each other, retorts already on their lips as to why their choice was the correct one. Satisfied at the slight chaos she helped create, Razor went to the kitchen with a cackle. And then—

“Get out of the kitchen or I’ll turn you into a living cutting board, Ava!”

And out that same doorway stumbled the nameless devil woman. Tabitha raised her eyebrows at her as they made eye contact. ‘Ava,’ huh?... She had to admit that the name *did* fit her a lot better than her suggestion. Short and sweet; punchy and to-the-point.

Ava’s smile was triumph leaning on the side of ‘cocky.’ Gloating of her intellectual victory. Tabitha did not need to be goaded in this game of wits. She was more surprised by the fact no fight had broken in the kitchen again. And they had not had to replace all their cutlery.

The noises from outside were starting to dim, the world reacting to the darkness. There they were, pretending to play house. Tabi had to ask questions. It wouldn’t get easier, and putting it off would only make it worse. Maybe she wasn’t brave enough to try it, not by herself, and she wasn’t about to ask Dami to be with her because she knew how hard it was for her to make choices...

Tabi almost slumped. It was only just past sunset and she was *exhausted*, more mentally than physically.

Even if Razor wasn’t the worst cook out of all of them (the masked one’s cooking was surprisingly edible if utterly lacking in presentation, Ava was the one who could set fire to water without even turning the stove on), Tabi wouldn’t eat. It would not have to do with the quality of the meal, but of her mind.

None of them remembered what happened before the cabin. The boys... they had been birdlike before, hadn’t they? According to the others’ testimonies, now, they were not: they looked like her. No feathers, no beaks. As confused as she felt, Dami had told her she thought the boys’ appearance was a curse. Tabi had dismissed the thought as something the fairytale-loving woman had thought up at the lack of a factual explanation.

The boys had called each of them a ‘Princess,’ and they had known it to be true. They didn’t remember any childhood to speak of. No memories of staying up late, of playing games, of first kisses, first sleepovers, first anything. Just empty voids. That was not normal.

Nothing about any of them, as much as a part of her wanted to keep pretending otherwise, was ‘normal.’ Most of the ones living in this very house with her weren’t altogether all that much more human than the boys had been in the beginning. Certainly not the animal walking heavily down the stairs, wings tucked in at her sides and tail trailing lazily behind her.

Tabitha hadn’t been sure she could speak, when they first met. She didn’t think she *preferred to*, even now, even if Tabitha now knew her to be capable of it. She gave no name. “I am what I am,” she’d told her, then leaned her large, lion-like head back down to rest. She’d been given no choice but to name her a Beast. Perhaps, once Tabitha had gotten to everyone else, she could be fed the scraps and hold onto the title of Princess.

On the Beast’s heels was the amalgamation that you could be kind to say were five conjoined twins. They, together with the chimera of a different kind, were the ones that would eat anything and required massive amounts of food. Then again, Tabi was sure that sustaining five people with the food quantity for one was just not feasible. Each of them had their head styled differently; another victim of Dami.

“About that name,” the centermost head spoke, turning to Tabi. The head most to the right rolled her eyes, the one to the left stifled a grin. “How about Plethora?”

Behind her came Winnie, her catlike grin widening at the promise of food. There were knots in her hair. Dami had not gotten to her yet. She smirked as she passed the five. “Because it means a lot?”

They grinned in unison. Tabi was almost sure she heard a snort in the corner, which—blackmail was more Winnie’s thing, but when Thelka was involved...

Aloud, Tabi said, “I’m *not* calling you that. That’s not a name!”

“A name is just a tool used to capture an aspect of who you are,” Plethora’s voices retorted. “We’d like our identifying quality to be the multitudes we find within ourselves. And this title serves our purpose.”

‘...*An aspect of who you are?*’ Tabitha felt a bit at odds with that explanation. She’d gotten comfortable with naming herself the way she had. It was odd, but it’d felt right. She’d grown into it. For some reason, the thought that Plethora had managed to self-reflect enough to grasp a name that truly *meant* something to them... bothered her.

“Did one of you download something odd again?” Thelka’s booming voice rang out, probably intending for every inhabitant of the house to hear her.

Their resident ghost, as of yet unnamed, popped up from the floor right beside her. “Not me.”

Thelka did not even flinch, eyes never straying from the screen. “This icon is new.”

Everyone walked towards her. Except Beast, who went to lounge on the couch, as cats do. Tabi paused, hesitating.

For whatever reason, she got the feeling this was big. That it was more than something that could break havoc in all their files. Some deep seated instinct in her burned, hands resting on the back of the chair Thelka was using.

“So?” Winnie asked, impatience tinting her voice. “What’s the holdup? Are you not going to open it?”

Thelka, Tabi was surprised to note, was hesitating. That woman never hesitated, spoke whatever was on her mind without caring of the consequences or the feelings of the people in front of her. She and Ava were very alike in that regard.

Thelka sighed. Something about the action felt final.

There were the usual files, each labeled with their descriptions and each one protected with a different password in case some of the others tried to snoop in.

There was an executable. A simple icon in black and white, of a stylized heart with- a dagger, piercing it through without blood. As far as they could see, it had no name. A chill went down her spine, and she was pretty sure it had nothing to do with the ghost to her left. That chill was internal.

“This isn’t one of your games, Ghost?” Thelka asked, her breath fogging by the spectre’s proximity.

“Or course it isn’t! Why would I do something like this?” She retorted.

“Then was it you, Witch?”

“Not me this time!” The aforementioned girl’s eyes darted away from the glances, choosing to focus somewhere above the screen. “Honestly, a computer program isn’t my thing!”

The cursor hovered over the icon, and Tabi found herself darting to stop it. “Hold on just a moment! We don’t know if that’s safe to open!” Granted, they had never gotten a computer virus so far, but Tabi was not about to break that streak. She had books and information in her folder, and among the many, many things she had learned, it was about viruses. While this situation didn’t make sense— the story of her life, really— she was firmly of the opinion that it was better to be safe than sorry. She only took risks if it was necessary. That part of her wouldn’t change even in this situation.

Oddly enough, Thelka seemed hesitant once more. “There’s something *off* about it... you feel it too.”

It was not a question, and yet Tabi did not know how to answer. There was that pit in her chest, and there was the fact she felt drawn to the program like a siren’s song.

“Oh, come on, where’s your sense of adventure?” Ava spoke up for the first time. Her grin was almost frightening as she placed her hand above Thelka’s.

Making her click on the program. And open it.

Tabi was thankful when the screen went black and remained black. Her eyes would not be able to take the assault that would be a white background with the glare of the monitor's light. Dami shrank a bit, all the same.

From the dark, white flickered into existence, still but an archipelago of islands in the sea of darkness. It shaped itself into text, awaiting it be read.

"Whatever horrors you may find in these dark spaces, have heart and see them through..." Thelka read, the tone curling upwards at the end.

"There are no premature endings. There are no wrong decisions." Winnie took over, and something in her shoulders relaxed, a hidden tension uncurled from within.

"There are only fresh perspectives and new beginnings," the spectre said, almost wistfully. Her eyes lidded.

And then, of a bigger size than the other sentences, *"This is a love story."* Dami finished, before her face split into a smile such that the sun would have trouble competing with her. "This is good! I didn't know there were interactive love stories!"

"That's because the games Ava tried to make you play were all fighting games," Beast interjected from her spot.

"After dinner? I don't know if I can play stuff with an upset stomach—"

A soothing piano tune began to play.

Loudly.

All of them had forgotten about the little thing called the volume.

It resounded throughout the room like an explosion, pounding against their skulls and shrieking in their ears. Before they could scramble to turn it down, in unison, they registered what was on the screen as each of them froze, ice rolling down their spines locking their limbs in place.

Beast got off of the sofa at that, ears flicking and pressed down in annoyance. She placed her front paw on Ava's back as she pushed herself up, trying to look past the mound of bodies. "What's in there that scared you all so— *oh.*"

It was a drawing. Not even a finished one, it was a sketchy sort of style that was pleasing to look at but had nothing in terms of color. What the drawing was, though, was a different story entirely.

Who am I?

Each of them was familiar with that damned basement. The heavy chain around the wrist. For a moment, they could still feel it. For a moment, they could feel everything. The stone, the

basement, the cold walls and floor, the dust in the air that dried their throats and made them cough and sneeze. The unrelenting boredom. The placeless sense of shame.

Which meant the girl on the screen, hunched over, was her. Them. Who they had been, once upon a time.

They were so shocked they didn't hear the door opening, the remaining inhabitants of the house joining them. Razor came out of the kitchen as the masked one glided down, from some unseen place, a trail of darkness following her like ash. The both of them paused at the odd sight of the eight girls crowding around the computer. Razor walked towards the light coming from the screen, having enough wits to turn down the volume.

The music confused her, confused all of them. Where had they heard that before?

And then, everyone collected, all of them as one, they turned to the image on the screen. The image of themselves. The image of everything.

How did I get here?

Tabitha felt as though she were being pulled from a trance as the masked one, the one whose name she had yet to ask, took a gloved hand to her and her twin's shoulders. She leaned down more to Dami, masked lip closing in at her ear. She shook her, much gentler than expected. Her voice was soft. Almost silent.

"Are you okay? I'm not doing this to you, am I?"

Damiana looked back, something afraid but almost eager in her eyes. Then she looked back at the screen. The music continued to play, as Tabitha regained enough awareness to view the others around her. Frozen still, shocked, as their minds struggled to process something that should have been impossible. Collectively, the most of them looked almost... afraid.

Another minute passed, the music droning on, on this side of familiar.

The contents of the screen were baffling. They had known, thanks to the warning beforehand, that this was a game, but to see the words there it was obvious this was the menu. The words '*Slay the Princess*' sat hunched over the top right of the screen, blinding white to contrast to the darkest spot of the basement.

Who had made this? Would it bear any more similarities to what had happened in the woods? Games took a long time to plan and do, how would this mysterious author be aware of what happened? This could not be just a coincidence, Tabitha denied to herself, those did not exist.

Winnie's voice snapped all of them back to reality, with an understandable stutter. "...W-What do we do?"

"Close it," the masked Princess blurted out. The others whipped around to stare at her. Tabi couldn't be sure, but she thought her eyes were wider under the mask. Was she afraid as well, or merely unsettled? Her gloved hands were still held onto Damiana's shoulders, not quite in

the same gentle reassurance and protectiveness as before. They'd pressed in closer, closer to her neck. She peered over her, hid behind her.

"What do you mean? This was sent here for a reason!" the quintet argued, voices overlapping. One confident, one unsure, one hysteric. One gleeful. One silent.

"No, I agree, shut it down." That was, perhaps unsurprisingly, Winnie. All Tabi knew was that she and her companion had some sort of 'history' and most likely not the good kind. It would make sense why she would not want to relive it. If this was, indeed, what the game would do.

"It said it's a love story, how bad can it be?" Dami asked. The breezy, almost nonchalant tone opened something in Tabi's stomach, head whirring with a thousand different possibilities. In the meantime, Winnie's hackles rose.

"Maybe a love story for *you*, but—"

"Look, I'm really, really trying not to go against the current here. I don't want to make you all do something you don't want to. I swear I'm not."

At once, every other Princess stopped talking to stare at the chime in from Dami, the last person they were expecting to interfere. There was something quivering in her eyes. Tabitha moved to console her, to tell her that it was okay and she was understood, but did not get a further chance.

"—but can you *blame* me? So much happened! I mean— stuff that you only see in stories! Stuff you should only see in stories!" She went off, arms thrashing about, frantic. "One second I'm getting out of the cabin and freezing from the inside, the next I'm hearing one of the boys going on about how another wasn't waking up and we were here! I ignore how I feel — the headache, the buzzing limbs, all that— and—"

She kept going, and *going*.

"Nobody was sure if all of us would wake up. We did but some of you were hurt badly. Some of you kept mixing up 'I' and 'we.' We didn't know what to do. You needed help. None of us know what happens after the cabin and the boys won't tell us anything. Maybe they can't. That's why we have to play this. To get actual answers to what in the world happened there and how everything fits."

At the end of her ramble, the most Princess-like of them all was left a disheveled mess. She had a frenzied look in her eyes, fly-away hairs sticking out in places. She took a breath to collect herself, shuddering and shallow and small, smaller still.

The silence rang between them, oppressive. She knew most of them weren't even sure that Dami had the capability for self-reflection, and that was clear from the shock on their faces. For once, all of Plethora seemed to share the same shock.

Slowly, the guilt leached into Tabi's heart. Because it was obvious that she was not the only one who had been having those questions robbing her of sleep. And not only because Dami,

too, was having anxiety about the past, but because she had been having it *alone*.

Shock cleared into something resolute.

Clara pulled herself away from Damiana, hands releasing their deathgrip, and the pair breathed at a more even rate. Winnie's eyes, trembling in the dark, steadied as they reflected the light of the screen.

One of Plethora's heads closed their eyes in subtle contemplation, one of them stared at Damiana with complex fascination, and one of them watched on. All of them. Blinking, breathing, being.

Those at the screen looked from Damiana to themselves, then to the computer.

Tabitha's heart was beating. It focused into something sharp.

"Just so that we're on the same page..." Tabi breached, trying to be as delicate as possible. "We reached the same conclusion. The ones who had to slay us were the boys. And none of us have asked them about everything that happened in the cabin— surprised you went there, Thelka— but Dami's right. This could be our chance. Nobody has to know."

Razor grinned, one of the points of her sharp teeth nicking her lip. "Ow— I'll get the popcorn."

Chapter 2: The dark's not taking prisoners

Chapter Summary

The girls try out the game that appeared in their computer.
Grievous harm to popcorn and mental states ensues.

Chapter Notes

Does anyone know how to format things? Formatting this chapter should not have taken me two whole days, shouldn't it?

It took more than a while, especially considering the amount of popcorn that had to be made to satisfy ten women, without taking into account the fact some of them were bigger than average, but they finally were all gathered in the living room, taking up every couch, every bit of floor with pillows, blankets, cushions, sheets.

Beast took an entire sofa for herself, nestled in a blanket Dami had provided. Winnie was in a cozy little nook to her right from a few pillows. The one with the mask sat at the very edge of one of the couches. Thelka took the other couch. The quintet was half-sitting on one of the arm rests. Razor was laying on her stomach on the floor, with a pillow supporting her hips and elbows. Ava was to her left, lazing in a beanbag she had materialized from somewhere, probably Winnie's room. Dami and Tabi took the centermost couch, swaddled in blankets. The ghost was trying, and failing, to wrap herself in a blanket.

Maybe they would have a first sleepover after all. Or, they would if the entire reason why they had decided to camp in the living room wasn't one such as this.

From above the huge bowls of salty and sweet popcorn (with butter and honey respectively), bigger now that they had made use of the TV, was that menu which had them frozen just a while before.

Tabitha had secured control of the mouse as soon as she was able. She was, admittedly, saved from having to answer to Thelka's rage by the ghost of all people, saying that if there was anyone more suited for a neutral playthrough it would be her. Or maybe she did not want to bear Thelka's tendency to not look at the bigger picture.

Tabi would have to think up a name for her, and soon. She wondered if 'Hanako' was acceptable or if she should stay away from ghost names in general culture.

“Everyone ready?” Tabi asked, glancing around the room.

“If you are, I suppose...” Winnie said in response, wary.

“Do you need to ask?” Dami looked uncharacteristically serious. She watched the screen almost without blinking, as though she would miss the secrets it held if she looked away.

“Last time I try to be nice,” Tabi murmured.

She took a deep breath. This was it. Without trying to think about what was going to happen, she clicked on the ‘New game’ button.

The screen went black, if only for a moment, before being replaced with words. More specifically, a title. Black on white.

Chapter I: The Hero and the Princess.

“This game sure has an odd definition of the word ‘Hero’,” Winnie commented as she darted to grab popcorn. “I would have used ‘Traitor’, ‘Backstabber’, ‘Two-Faced’-”

“We don’t know which one of them we’re playing as!” Tabi interrupted. Honestly, they had barely gone past the title screen and already they were interrupting! At this rate they wouldn’t finish in a month!

“You’re right, good point.”

Tabi clicked again with a roll of her eyes.

The background changed, to reveal a crude interpretation of a forest. No colors except the entire spectrum from white to black; it was charming on its own, the shadows being represented by many repeating black lines instead of changing color values. They appeared to be moving on their own slightly. It sure did its job to make it like the environment was its own thing.

She appreciated that for just a moment. One heartbeat later, text appeared at the bottom of the screen, along with, surprisingly, a voice.

The Narrator

You're on a path in the woods. And at the end of that path is a cabin. And in the basement of that cabin is a princess.

Silence reigned once again. Then, pandemonium.

“Who the hell is that?!” Winnie shouted from Mount Pillow. She leaned back as soon as she heard that voice. Her tail was puffed up.

“I know Him,” the ghost murmured, leaning in a little further. She smiled as if in on a private joke. “I guess the name ‘Narrator’ *does* kind of fit, doesn’t it?”

Thelka laughed. The sound of it was like rolling thunder, at first a dull murmur beneath her breath, then building atop itself in a lingering crescendo until it filled the room in full, boisterous and booming. It was so deep Tabitha could feel it in her own chest, rumbling. The floor beneath her feet felt uncertain. Weak in the presence of such overwhelming strength. She chuckled softly, returning to herself; a hand to her heart, and a serene smile sent to Tabitha's bewildered face staring at the elder woman behind her.

Elder not like a person, but like... Tabitha didn't *believe* that, did she? No, no. But for just a moment... it felt...

Thelka spoke, voice like satin and breath like incense. "Don't pay that worm any mind. He is of no true consequence; he's only here to describe our stage."

"Maybe Dami was right," The quintet chimed in. "Maybe it is in a story format. The boy's the hero, then we were a princess, now we even have a narrator!" Each head leaned in, endlessly curious.

Tabi exchanged a glance with her 'twin'. Somehow, she did not think that was it. Instead, she said, "Hold on, that's how it starts? No backstory, no worldbuilding, nothing? Here's where you are, good luck?"

"Seems straightforward enough to me, why waste time in all that when you can get to the meat of the story quicker?" Ava shrugged.

Tabi clicked again.

The Narrator

You're here to slay her. If you don't, it will be the end of the world.

The ghost's smile did not appear to hold any humor in it anymore. The wisps which composed her body seemed to stretch and tear through the air, skin tightening on her face, bone showing through translucent skin. Her eyes sank further, darkening her expression. "What an unfounded accusation to *kill* someone over."

"Very specific," Tabitha remarked in sympathy.

"And that's it?" The masked one asked, tilting her head in her hands. "He just sends us on our way, just like that?"

"Stories always start with that. A setting, a character, a task. Honestly, don't any of you read?" Dami interrupted. The mask turned around to just stare at her. Tabi made Dami lean back, away from her stare. The others were momentarily stunned at the unexpected change in her tone.

"Dami, I'm so proud of you right now." Ava gave her a wide grin. Dami hesitantly smiled back.

This whole thing made no sense, none whatsoever. How could it have come into existence? Two months after the beginning of the rest of their lives, this... *thing* showed up out of

nowhere? Sporting them as characters? It was bizarre, disturbing. Tabi couldn't wrap her mind around it. The more she thought, the more confused she felt, until her head began to hurt.

She clicked again. A list of choices appeared before her. Hesitantly, she scrolled through, reading as she went—as did the rest of the room.

- (Explore) The end of the world? What are you talking about?

“Oh thank you, he could ask questions!” Tabitha muttered, burrowing herself deeper in the blankets. Some of the others nodded in agreement.

- (Explore) Have you considered that maybe the only reason she's going to end the world is **because** she's locked up?

“You mean to tell me, he got what was the crux of the problem so quickly but he decided to go ahead anyway?” the masked one's voice was soft as silk, but Tabi still felt a chill go down her spine.

- (Explore) Killing a princess seems kind of bad, though, doesn't it?
- (Explore) Can't someone else do this?

“Maybe that way we will get to meet the others. They don't seem like the kind to give up, though...”

- (Explore) Forget it, I'm not doing this.
- (Explore) Have you considered that maybe I'm okay with the world ending?

“If only my little bird had seen such a way from the start...” Thelka sighed wistfully. “Even if he got there in the end, I can't say I wouldn't have preferred a more obedient servant.”

“I wouldn't have minded an attitude like that, either,” the other woman said; though she wore a mask, Tabitha could imagine a pouty lip beneath it. “Better than being so overly concerned with it all. It didn't even matter in the end!”

- (Explore) Do I get some sort of reward for doing this?
- Oh, okay. Thanks for telling me what to do.
- Sweet! I've always wanted to off a monarch. Viva la revolución!

“Wait, why do they know Spanish?” Dami sat up a bit straighter.

Cue every other head turning to stare at her.

“I beg your biggest pardon?”

“‘Viva la revolución’, that's Spanish for ‘Long live the revolution’. Why do they know that? Are they bilingual? Can you imagine if they had spoken a different language than us when we met?”

“Dami- Damiana-” Tabi put her free hand in the air, palm to her, to ask her to stop.

“How do *you* know that?” Razor inquired from her spot on the floor.

Dami tilted her head. “While Tabi was learning how everything worked, it was easy to see the language here wasn't the same we spoke, so I taught myself it. I know we haven't been here long but... did... none of you do this?”

“Note to self: Never underestimate the kid.” Tabi heard Ava mutter. Honestly, it was something everyone would have to keep in mind. Dami, apparently, was full of surprises.

- [Silently continue to the cabin.]
- [Turn around and leave.]

“What do the ‘Explore’ options mean?” Beast asked from her sofa. As one, the others shrugged.

“We need answers, right? All set in questioning the Narrator say ‘I!’” Tabi rose her voice so everyone could hear her. A chorus of ‘I’s answered her. With a satisfied smile, she clicked on the first option.

The Narrator

I'm talking about the end of everything as we know it. No more birds, no more trees, and, perhaps most problematically of all, no more people. You have to put an end to her.

“And He answers with nothing,” the ghost, ironically enough, narrated.

“Impressive interrogation skills, Tabitha,” Winnie snarked.

“Why is this suddenly my fault?” Tabi sighed. Her throat was starting to become sore. She had not talked this much in a while. “It technically *is* what the end of the world means.”

“The options changed!” Razor pointed out.

- (Explore) But how can a princess locked away in a basement end the world?
- (Explore) If you don't tell me why she's dangerous, I'm not going to kill her.
- (Explore) Do you have any evidence to back this up?

“Not changed,” the five-in-one corrected, “added to. All the rest endures.”

“Evidence, I want evidence.” Tabitha muttered.

“Agreed.”

“No objections here.”

Similarly worded comments answered her as she chose that option.

The Narrator

Look, you're already on the path that leads to the cabin. Why would you be here if it weren't to complete a very important task? You've made it this far, you might as well reach the end of your journey.

"I really want that backstory." Tabi was getting majorly irritated by the absolute vagueness that was spewing from the Narrator's mouth. Did a voice have a mouth?

"A dashing Hero going on a journey, helping people along the way, before reaching their goal. Tale as old as time." Dami hummed, smiling.

"What kind of hero would he be, he didn't even know killing someone was part of the deal!" Winnie pointed out.

"Maybe this means he doesn't have to do it? A detour in his ultimate goal?" Dami answered, but it seemed even she knew it was a reach. Frowning the slightest bit, she poured a liberal amount of honey in the sweet popcorn bowl. When she grabbed a handful, her hands came away sticky.

- (Explore) But how can a princess locked away in a basement end the world?

The Narrator

Don't linger on the specifics. You have a job to do here. Just get in there and do what needs to be done. We're all counting on you.

"I'd prefer to linger here, actually," Tabitha rebutted to the screen. Predictably, there was no response. "The 'how' and 'why' of murder aren't specifics, just basic details on motivation."

"He can't even *say* what He wants us to do," the spectre noted, to Tabi's appreciation. She hadn't caught that. "Almost like He knows it's wrong."

"Don't give him too much credit," Winnie snarked. "Just because he's concealing his awfulness in language doesn't change his nature."

- (Explore) Have you considered that maybe the only reason she's going to end the world is **because** she's locked up?

The Narrator

While I appreciate the mental exercise, we are running up against a bit of a ticking clock.

"At least that explains why he didn't even bother to say hello..." the ghost muttered to herself. Tabitha only caught it because she was keeping an ear out for any more of her commentary.

"He can sure take his sweet time if he feels like it."

Tabitha turned to that speaker at once; she'd been too engaged for too long in this conversation for Tabitha to not know her name. "Dollface," she greeted, and said dollface perked right up. "What can I call you by?"

She seemed taken aback for a moment, wide eyes blinking in open surprise behind her mask. Then she settled, body relaxing even if those unsettlingly big eyes of hers didn't. "I'm between names right now."

"Just pick one or two. For the sake of my sanity."

She thought it over for a few minutes, the Narrator's line about ticking clocks still stuck up on the screen. She hummed, apparently in deep contemplation. "Clara."

Tabi would have to put it to pen at a later date. For now, she needed to grill an uncooperative man for answers.

The Narrator

Nevertheless, let me assure you: the Princess is locked up because she's dangerous, she is not dangerous because she's locked up.

And before you decide to waste even more of our time by asking how I know that, let me suggest a more pragmatic lens through which to view this situation.

Causality doesn't matter here, because the end result is the same no matter what led us up to this point. If the Princess leaves the cabin, the world will end, and there is no changing that.

"An oddly specific condition," the quintet opined.

"It'd be better if the basement had something to keep us entertained while we waited," Ava told the group.

"I know!" Dami agreed, her voice a youthful whine. "No bed, no mattress, nothing, who even does that?!"

The Narrator

It's no use arguing semantics over a metaphorical chicken-or-egg, because the egg is hatched and it's about to ruin everything..

Unless, of course, you do your job and *slay her*.

"He keeps using that word." Thelka noted.

"I don't think it means what he thinks it means," Dami kept it going.

"How so?" Razor wondered.

"You slay dragons, or monsters, or the like. Not people."

"Was this new option here the whole time?" Tabi muttered, clicking on the very big option that she hadn't seen a few questions ago.

- (Explore) Look, I'll go to the cabin and I'll talk to her, and if she's as bad as you say she is then **maybe** I'll slay her. But I'm not committing to anything until I've had the chance to meet her face to face.

“That seems like the only way to get him to shut up.” Beast rumbled.

The Narrator

Then I guess we'll just have to see what happens. But a word of warning— if you go in prepared to hear her out, she could easily trap you in her web of lies. And the more you listen to her honeyed words, the harder it'll be to pull yourself out..

Then each and every one of us is doomed.

So, sure, go talk to her. See how that turns out for all of us.

“What’s the point of talking? If I wanted to end the world I could just knock him out and go my way.” Ava commented while munching on popcorn. Some of it had gotten stuck in her hair. She would regret that later.

“You’re right, he definitely hasn’t met you at all.” the masked one replied.

“See?” Ava grinned.

“At least we’re keeping an open mind...”

The screen, finally, turned black for a few moments, before an image appeared. It was a grassy, overgrown hill, surrounded by trees. In the background, a sky full of stars. On the very top of the hill, what had once been the prison of every girl there. The cabin. Wooden, unassuming in every way. Light was coming from within.

The Narrator

You make your way to the short path of the cabin. You’ll find the Princess within.

“So that’s how it looks from outside...” Winnie breathed out.

“It should have been something grander. It was housing us!” Thelka said with a nod at the screen.

Voice of the Hero

We’re not going to go through with this, right? She's a Princess. We're supposed to save princesses, not slay them.

Silence once again, for a moment. Then, a cacophony of noise.

“Hold up, voice? Why is there another voice?” Razor pushed herself up by the elbows, creating indents on the pillows.

“This one definitely wasn’t there when it was my turn.” Winnie’s voice was almost a growl.

“Oh. Hi, Braveheart.” the ghost muttered to herself. She had been wondering where he would appear.

“Maybe he’s like- his conscience! He’s trying to make him do the right thing!” Dami proposed, her eyes almost shining. Was this her dashing hero? He was a lot more subdued than usual!

“Knock it off, everyone,” Tabi said, her voice leaving no room for argument. She was deep in thought, and thoroughly unnerved. What was this about voices in his head? How many people had been controlling her companion? Had she gotten free just by sheer luck (and her companion’s lapse of judgment)?

The Narrator

Ignore him. He doesn't know what he's talking about.

“Well I say ‘listen to him’,” the Quintet said. “Killing someone is usually bad. If you entertain that thought without any extenuating circumstances then you’re a monster.”

“I entertain it.” Razor turned her head to look at them.

“My point still stands.”

Ava choked on her juice, narrowly avoiding spraying the masked one with it.

Tabitha tried to ignore the clownery and proceeded into the cabin. The sight that greeted them all was more than a little familiar, though they never saw it from that angle.

The Narrator

The interior of the cabin is almost entirely bare. The air is stale and musty and the floor and walls are painted in a fine layer of dust. The only furniture of note is a plain wooden table. Perched on that table is a pristine blade.

The blade is your implement. You'll need it if you want to do this right.

“Someone needed to hire an interior decorator. There’s a table. Only a table! What about a chair? A cushion? Some plants?” Ava surprised everyone by saying. She looked around at the others. “What? I can’t always be the rage-gal.”

“The cabin was only intended to be temporary, then.” Spectre opined. “If it weren’t then there would be more items of comfort.”

“Can we keep going? There are other things that are far more important than whether or not the cabin was up to standard with basic furniture.”

“Like what?” Beast asked.

“Like us and this game!” Dami said at once.

“You’re not helping your case at all.”

- (Explore) [Take the blade.]
- [Enter the basement.]

Tabi’s eyebrows shot up. Well, this was interesting. This choice held weight, this choice looked final. She looked around the room, meeting the eyes of everyone. Another monumental choice. To take the blade, or not.

If it were her, she would take the blade, because you couldn’t be too cautious. On the other hand, she knew for a fact she had not been dangerous, and they had argued with the narrator over that fact.

Then again, her opinion wasn’t the only one that mattered, at least in this run.

“If it were me, I would want to help us. No steel claw for this one.” Beast opined. Her tail smacked Winnie in the face.

“Phew!” the aforementioned girl spat out hairs. “What did I even do to you?! If it counts for anything, I agree with the furball. If we take the knife, that is a threat.”

“The one who goes to the basement has all the power in this situation. We should show it.” Thelka added. Her face rested in one hand, a lot more interested now than she was when they were still in the forest.

“No blades,” Dami said, so low Tabi had to strain to hear her. “Please.”

“I’ve had enough of knives for a lifetime.” the ghost said.

“Either is fine by me,” the one with the mask shrugged. Okay, Tabi really needed to get their names. She was getting tired of those descriptors.

“Why NOT take the blade? Blades are great!” Razor cheered, her painted-on eyebrows going up and down. She had been made to paint them on when she got tired of the others hinting that she was too creepy without them.

“Let’s take it! What hope does the bird boy have against someone like us if he doesn’t take the blade?” Ava leaned in her seat.

“We pass,” the quintet said, far less in sync than usual.

Four versus four, with two abstaining. It figured it would end in a draw. Because luck wasn’t kind to her.

“What are you waiting for, take the blade.” Thelka waved her hand impatiently.

Tabi turned to her, smile fixed in place. It was not a real smile. “I haven’t decided yet, let me think.”

“Everyone here knows my vote is worth at least three of you.” Thelka leaned back on the couch, looking every bit the royal she was.

“Bitch-!” Winnie started to stand up, only to be stopped by yet another tail to the face. Before any of the others could do so much as start to get up as well, the noise of a door opening rang out as the screen turned black once again for a moment.

Tabi looked at Thelka straight in the eyes. “Never argue with the one making the decisions.”

The background coalesced into stairs, scissored with black lines. At the end of the stairs, wood gave way to stone as they were about to enter what was, actually, their prison. They had been under the earth. Entombed.

The Narrator

Her voice softly carries up the stairs.

H-hello? Is someone there?

Nine heads snapped up so quickly Tabi was sure she heard some cracks. Like her own neck. Ow, she would feel it in the morning. “Dami? That sounds like you.”

Dami was staring straight ahead, her face so blank it scared her.

“Not quite,” Winnie intervened as she tried to pry the bowl of salted popcorn out of Razor’s infuriatingly rigid hands. “Could be me, too.”

Ava turned, slowly, towards her. “That’s hard to believe.”

“You can check later, if you don’t believe me.”

“We will!”

Voice of the Hero

It’s hypnotizing. It’s the kind of voice you only have to hear once to remember it for the rest of your life.

Were- were humans supposed to turn that shade of red? It was concerning. Dami placed her burning cheeks on the blanket. Muffled as it was, they could all hear the smile on her voice. “He’s so kind... thank you, Hero!”

“You know he can’t hear you, right?” the masked one probed.

“It’s the thought that counts!”

The Narrator

Don’t let it fool you. It’s all part of the manipulation. You’re playing a dangerous game by coming here unarmed.

“Why? It’s not like she has a knife at the ready. And she’s chained up. Why would it be dangerous?” Tabi asked the screen, as if expecting it would answer.

From the sound she let out, Razor appeared to be *deflating*. Her whole body shook with the force of her laughter. There were actual tears running down her cheeks. She was starting to turn purple. Were they supposed to do something?

“Of coouurse, why would it be dangerous?” Razor wheezed once she had enough air. Tabi supposed, considering the company she was keeping, that was, indeed, a stupid question.

- 'Hi!'
- 'Just checking in on you.'
- 'I'm here to save you!'
- (Lie) 'I'm here to save you!'
- Hey, I think I'm here to slay you?"
- Continue down the stairs.

Ava snorted loudly. “I’m here to slay you?” Why is that an option? Honesty above all!” her chest rumbled with the effort of keeping her chuckles in.

Thelka had a small smile on her face, as if enjoying a private joke. “Look at the question mark, that’s not a confident answer.”

Winnie had fixated on another thing. “Why the ‘lie’ option? Is he that bad at lying to you guys?”

“You have to admit, the boys aren’t the best at social interactions.” the quintet smiled.

“We’re saving Dami, aren’t we?” Tabi looked at the others. No way she was killing her in cold blood, not when the flesh-and-blood Damiana was sitting right besides her, trying to eat popcorn without being covered in honey.

From the looks on their faces, she could tell the others felt the same way. Well, enough of the others.

The Narrator

How many times I do I have to tell you how dangerous letting her out of here would be before it finally sinks in?

“Go suck a lemon, Narrator,” Winnie tried to throw some popcorn at the screen. it landed right on Razor’s head. Tabi prayed to anything that might be listening that she wouldn’t notice.

Wait, really?! You're here to rescue me? I was starting to think I'd be stuck down here forever!

Come downstairs! I want to see the face of my rescuer.

No words were spoken, just glances with various degrees of understanding and pity.

The Narrator

You walk down the stairs and lock eyes with the Princess. There's a heavy chain around her wrist, binding her to the far wall of the basement.

Beast growled so loud Winnie scrambled off the sofa and went right to the floor. The growl cut itself off, a different noise building in the back of her throat, rhythmic and— oh, it was laughter. “Scared, kit?”

“Seriously, what did I ever do to you?! Yeah, the chain sucked, but we’re letting her out!” Winnie glowered from below, unconsciously massaging her right wrist.

Stone walls, a stone floor so uneven lying down was deeply uncomfortable, the only light coming from the window too high to reach. The chain, the other chain that had only seen an use in Tabi’s memories. The girl chained there, a face so alien now, so familiar. If she looked hard enough, Tabi might even find echoes of its contours in the mirror.

And yet Tabi’s mind was more enraptured with that dangling chain to the side. Was the chain for her companion all along? Had that been the case for all the other boys as well? Were they supposed to be chained alongside the Princesses? If so, did they possess world-ending powers as well? Was this all just a scheme to trap them too?

If it was, then she regretted not making conversation when it came to her own basement. Even if she had been mad at him, her silent treatment might have been a little excessive... and gone on a little too long.

Voice of the Hero

She's beautiful. How could someone like this be a threat to anyone?

"God, Hero, chill."

And there went Dami, trying to outred a tomato and winning.

“This is good, Dami! He’s underestimating you!” Winnie whooped gleefully from her newly claimed spot on the floor.

“Way to state the obvious. Of course she’s beautiful, we know, we have eyes.” the ghost said. If possible, Dami went even redder.

The Narrator

I am begging you to stay focused. There's a lot riding on you here.

Hi! I can't believe you're here, I've been waiting for something like this to happen forever.

...I hope you brought something to deal with these chains.

“...How could we forget the chains?!” Ava burst out. “Dami, I love you, but I don’t think your body is strong enough to rip those chains off!”

“Don’t worry, Ava, I have my ways.” Dami smiled sweetly at her.

“Go upstairs and get the blade!” Thelka ordered, leaning further on her seat.

The Narrator

Don't do it. If she gets out of those chains we're all one step closer to The End.

“Good. Maybe the world should end if they chained us up like that!” Clara rested her chin on her gloved hands.

Tabi barely read the options that popped up before deciding to talk with the in-game Princess for a bit, prompting an unsure ‘O...kay.’

The woman on the screen made her heart ache. She did look a lot like her ‘twin’ beside her.

“I thought we were all Team Rescue Damiana? What changed?” the spectre questioned, floating over to where Tabi and Dami were.

“We are, but we want answers too.”

- (Explore) 'What's your name?'
- (Explore) "I don't know anything about you. For all I know you're locked up down here for a reason.'
- (Explore) "If I'm the first person you've seen in a while, what have you been eating? Or drinking?"
- (Explore) "I was sent here to slay you. You're apparently supposed to end the world..."
- (Explore) "What are you going to do if I let you out of here?"
- "I'm going to keep you locked away down here. At least for a little bit. We can get to know each other better while I decide what to do." [Keep her locked away.]
- "I'm sorry, but I just can't trust you. This doesn't add up, and it isn't worth the risk to take your word over the potential fate of the world." [Retrieve the blade.]
- [Go back upstairs to retrieve the blade without saying another word]
- "I can't believe they've been keeping you down here like this! I'm getting you out of here." [Examine the chains.]
- "Okay, I'm going to get you out of here. Don't make me regret this." [Examine the chains.]

Another wide range of options, though thankfully less than what they’d worked through in the woods; it seems their focus had narrowed.

Those choices at the bottom of the list were final in more ways than one. The reasoning used... “it’s a fair concern to have,” Tabi admitted despite herself. “Neither of us really knew each other. It was all about trust.”

Razor, it seemed, was focused on other things. “‘Let's keep you chained in a stone basement so we can get to know each other!’ That’s the worst idea for a date I’ve ever heard.”

There was something like a static in the air. Tabi's mouth tasted strange, wrong, all of a sudden. Her chest constricted with a foreign anxiety, heart skipping a beat. The moment passed, though her palms remained clammy.

She... wouldn't be choosing to lock herself away, she guessed.

Without much further thought, Tabi maneuvered her mouse to pick the first choice. It seemed safe enough. At the incredulous looks of the women around her, she waved her free hand. "We needed something to break the ice!"

Oh...

The drawing in front of them changed into a nervous posture, eyes looking away.

The Narrator

She pauses, carefully formulating her words before she responds.

The way the drawing changed poses made everyone relax just a bit. That seemed more in line with the Dami they knew.

You can address me as 'Your Royal Highness. Or you can just call me 'Princess' if 'Your Royal Highness' is too formal.

"As you wish, Your Royal Highness Damiana." Winnie turned to her and did an exaggerated bow, not low enough that she was presenting her neck to her.

"Does Your Highness want more popcorn?" the ghost's edges flickered with laughter.

"Is the lighting to Your Highness Dami's liking, or should we turn off some?" Razor joined in, a too-sharp smile distorting her features.

Dami herself was laughing. "You all are bad people," she said without heat.

Voice of the Hero

Is 'Princess' her name or her title? What if it's both? Could you imagine being named Princess Princess?

A wave of laughter shook the women anew.

"Oh no, he's a dork." Winnie despaired.

"How- How do you think up something like that?" Tabi wondered aloud.

"Imagine, if you will with us, the Princess of Princesses. The highest authority, above all Princesses that ever could or will be. All may yield to her grandiose, ever-expansive domain," the quintet divagued their dramatic tirade between snorts and giggles and smiles.

Thelka, unsurprisingly, scowled at the display. She was wholly without good humor. “That is called a Queen.”

- (Explore) "So is Princess your name?"

Like I said, you can call me Princess if you'd like!

...

I'm sorry. I've been down here so long I guess I've just forgotten. I must have a name, though! Everyone has a name.

“...I had forgotten about this.” Winnie said, her eyes huge.

“Me too.”

“As did I.”

“Me three.”

“That’s not how it goes, idiot.”

Voice of the Hero

Okay. That's weird.

The Narrator

She hadn't even thought to pick a name for herself. Hopefully you're starting to see that she can't be trusted. Go back upstairs, get the blade, and slay her before it's too late.

“So which one is it? Is she a master manipulator, or someone who would forget to make up such basic information?” Tabi asked the screen. Predictably, it didn’t answer back.

- (Explore) "What are you going to do if I let you out of here?"

The Narrator

The Princess hesitates before responding.

Voice of the Hero

She doesn't know. She's been down here too long to have any idea of what she'd do in another life.

Dami smiled weakly. “Thanks for having my back.”

The Narrator

She knows what she'd do. She's just searching for whatever answer she thinks you want to hear.

“What would even be the right answer, in this case?” The ghost wondered.

Are you looking for the truth, or are you looking for the 'right' answer? Because with the dynamic we have going on here I don't think the specifics of what I'd 'do' really matter.

It's not like you'd believe me.

“SHUT HIM UP, DAMI!” Ava cheered. Mercifully, Tabitha was spared the mundane horror of buttered popcorn spraying all over the floor. It was a close call with her reckless behavior.

From the way Beast was staring at Ava's bowl, it didn't seem like she would've minded. Her own bowl, Tabitha saw, was emptied and licked clean. Saliva dribbled from her maw.

- "I can't believe they've been keeping you down here like this! I'm getting you out of here." [Examine the chains.]

“Finally.” Clara hummed. Dami had a relieved smile on her face, mirroring the one of her screen counterpart.

The Narrator

You're only making this more difficult...

Thank you, thank you!

The Narrator

You're making a huge mistake.

Voice of the Hero

No. You're doing the right thing.

The Narrator

You walk up to the chains binding the Princess to the wall and give them a tug.

They're large and heavy, far too solid for you to even imagine trying to break them apart.

“They're the size of a hand, there's no way he would've been able to do it.” the ghost shook her head.

I'm guessing you don't have the key.

Voice of the Hero

Maybe it's somewhere upstairs.

“I doubt a key exists in the first place,” Clara said.

The Narrator

Doubtful. Whoever locked the Princess away down here intended for her to never see the light of day. They wouldn't have just left the key to her chains somewhere in the cabin.

“Ew, I agreed with him.”

- 'And if there isn't a key... do you have any other ideas?
- I'm going to check upstairs. Maybe the key's still lying around somewhere up there. And if not, maybe I can at least find something to break you free.'

Maybe there's some way to break the chains?

Or if that doesn't work I guess we can always cut me out of them.

The Narrator

She offers the suggestion with almost complete nonchalance.

Voice of the Hero

If we were stuck down here for long enough, I'm sure we'd be nonchalant about cutting our way out if it meant we could finally be free.

“Holy shit, Dami.” Ava blurted out. “Didn’t expect that from you.”

The screen turned black again, before reforming into a view of a heavy, closed wooden door. The sound of a lock being put in place echoed in the room.

The Narrator

You attempt to make your way out of the basement, but the door at the top of the stairs slams shut. You hear the click of a lock sliding into place.

Voice of the Hero

Is someone else here?

“What the- That’s not fair!” the Quintet exclaimed.

“Could that be one of the others?” Dami suggested nervously, her hands twisting into her blanket.

“I can think of someone that would do that,” Winnie hissed.

- (Explore) 'Hey! Let me out of here!'
- (Explore) [Try the door.]
- [Return to the bottom of the stairs.]

“We all agree that yelling will do nothing, right?” Tabi asked the room.

“And trying the door won’t work, because it’s obviously locked from the outside.” Clara said.

“Down we go, then.”

The Narrator

You make your way to the bottom of the stairs. This would have been so much easier if you'd just taken the blade like you were supposed to.

Voice of the Hero

Easier for whom?

Tabi blinked. “That’s an excellent point.” Something had taken control of her companion when it was her time to be freed. Could a voice conspire against them? Was such a thing even possible?

The Narrator

Easier for everyone. Look at the mess you're in.

Once again, the screen went black as the view returned to that of the chained Princess, looking at them with a worried expression.

I heard the door slam... they locked you down here too, didn't they?

The Narrator

There's a slight panic rising in the Princess' voice.

“...at least you won’t be alone,” Clara said, gently. Tabi felt her eyebrows migrate North.

If I could just get out of these chains I *know* we could force our way out of here together.

“That’s the Dami we know and love,” Tabi smiled at her. Damiana’s smile was a little shaky around the edges.

“...the music’s stopped.” Beast’s comment made them jump.

“What?”

“When she said that. The music cut off. Listen, there’s only silence.”

That pit in her stomach was back. Her fingers clicked once more-

Only to see screen Dami gnawing at her arm with such a ferocity that she found bone in moments, blood barely starting to drip down her, with teeth that were not that pointy and sharp a moment ago.

“Holy SHIT!” Witch jumped back, hitting Beast’s front paws.

“I'm liking you more and more, you know?” Ava looked back at Dami, stars practically shining in her eyes.

Beast laughed. “Little kitten’s got fangs! I knew you had to have something like that somewhere!”

Dami very determinedly looked at the floor. The music had changed once again, an ominous, foreboding tune.

The Narrator

She barely hesitates before raising her arm to her mouth, her teeth tearing through her limb with the determination of a trapped wolf.

As she rips her flesh from her bone, a sound comes from behind you. The clang of bouncing metal.

The screen changed to that of a blade bouncing off the stone floor.

The Narrator

It's the blade from upstairs. You're not sure how it made its way down here, but if there's a time to strike, it's now.

“...what?”

“We left that upstairs!”

“What’s going on here?!”

Voice of the Hero

Or we could use it to free her.

The Narrator

You won't like what happens if you do that.

- [Save the Princess.]

That was the only option possible to take.

“SUCK IT, YOU INCOMPETENT STORYTELLER!” Ava’s cry rang gleefully in the room together with others, as pillows were thrown into their in celebration.

Popcorn went to the air like fireworks. Clara hugged an extremely surprised Beast. Thelka was the smuggest they had ever seen her. "I told you he was a worm."

The Narrator

Ugh. Fine.

Against your better judgment, you place the blade against the ragged, self-inflicted wound on the Princess' arm, just above the unyielding chain binding her to this place.

Ava wolf whistled at the image displayed, a pair of scaly arms tearing away the Princess' arm, as she stared at the view with huge eyes. "Nice arms!"

"The nails are too long for my liking," Clara said.

Tabi let herself laugh, let herself focus on the almost goofy expression of the princess on the screen. "Dami, what big eyes you have!"

The Narrator

You cut into her flesh. The blade is sharp, and it takes little effort to crack through the bone of her arm.

There were some shudders when the image showed the Princess ripping away what was left of her hand, it going to the floor.

The Narrator

Her limb falls to the ground, and the heavy chains follow suit.

Voice of the Hero

She didn't so much as utter a sound through the whole ordeal.

The Narrator

No. She didn't.

She smiles softly as her gaze meets yours, blood from her wounded arm dripping rhythmically to the ground.

Voice of the Hero

How is she still smiling after everything? It's like she isn't even bothered by what just happened.

"Adrenaline is a hell of a drug," Ava smiled in turn with the Princess as the screen focused on her, bloody lips and everything.

Tabi blinked, trying not to think about what could happen. Dami, of all people, didn't deserve that. "I don't think shrugging off a cut off arm is because of adrenaline."

"It could be! Everything hurts more since we got here, so who knows."

Thank you. Now let's get out of here.

- [Approach the locked door.]

The screen went black once more. Unlike before, there was text in it.

The Narrator

No. We won't have any of that. The stakes are too high. You can't just let her escape into the world... no. I can't just let her escape into the world.

The room went cold.

“What is that supposed to mean..?”

The image was now the Princess with her back turned, with the same scaly hand gripping the bloodstained blade, pointing it at the woman's back. Exposed. Vulnerable.

Tabi seeked Dami's hand. She had not wanted to think about it, had not wanted to know how everything had gone for her. The similarities sickened her. Their first encounter with their companions had been too alike.

Twins. The reflection of one another. She had never thought it could make sense, but it did.

Behind them, a growl built in Winnie's throat. It sounded strained, stressed, as if in preparation rather than warning.

The Narrator

As the Princess approaches the bottom stair, your body steps forward and raises the blade.

Voice of the Hero

Wait... this isn't fair. You can't just do that!

The Narrator

Watch me.

Wh-What are you doing?

“He can do that?!” Ava gestured frantically at the screen.

“What the fuck?” Razor bolted upright.

“He can be controlled like that?”

“Of course he can. I thought you knew.” that was Thelka. "With creatures like him, you only have to take-"

"Their will," Clara interrupted, like she couldn't stop herself. Instead of getting angry at the interruption, Thelka nodded approvingly.

"Exactly. How did you know?"

"I..." For the second time that night, Clara appeared slightly confused. "I don't know. I just do. I am what I am."

A small part of Tabi not concerned with what was happening on screen went cold at those comments. What did they mean by that? Could they take wills too? Was living together a mistake? Who had she been living with, that they discussed robbing people - people like her companion - of autonomy so nonchalantly?

Dami had started to shake. Very slightly.

On the screen, the Princess turned around, worried.

Tabi turned her gaze to the list of options, and felt her soul drop to her feet.

- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

“No, no, no, don't do this...” Tabi muttered as she frantically moved down the wall of options. Winnie leaned in, the light from the screen making deep shadows on her face.

- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Warn her]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

“YES! Oh thank God...” Tabi breathed a sigh of relief. Razor had completely shredded her pillows. Thelka watched with interest. Beast and Clara were immobile. Ava was gnashing her teeth so hard they could hear it. The ghost had wrapped herself against Dami. Maybe that was why she was shaking so badly.

Winnie scoffed. She opened her mouth, before closing it just as fast. A humorless laugh escaped her lips while wearing a smile with no trace of warmth.

On screen, the Princess moved away.

The Narrator

Stop that.

Something's come over you, hasn't it? Y-you know you don't have to do this, right?

“Dami, I’m sorry...” Tabi's hand was going numb by how hard Damiana was gripping it. She bumped shoulders with her. At least, Dami had her eyes closed. "Do you want to leave the room?"

A shuddering breath. "I'll be okay."

The Narrator

Your body lunges forward, the blade held low, ready to sink into her heart.

But the Princess dodges, stumbling back against the wall before the blade has a chance to connect.

Everyone could breathe a little easier as they saw the events unfolding, the warning having been enough for her to jump out of the way.

The Narrator

Stop it! Stop trying to resist me! I'm trying to get you out of here alive.

“No, you’re trying to make us kill someone!” the Quintet shrieked, yelled, shouted, sobbed.

- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Resist]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

The Narrator

The blade! Move. The. Blade!

“Hell no!”

“Fuck OFF!”

It was a miracle the TV was still intact.

The Narrator

As your body remains frozen in stubborn resistance, the Princess takes a cautious step forward.

We both know this isn't you...

The Narrator

She nervously reaches towards you and takes the blade from your infuriatingly rigid hands... What are you *doing*?

“Saving our friend?”

“Not taking a life?”

“Not being a scrotum?”

Winnie whistled low. “You’re braver than I am, Dami. I would’ve run.”

“Okay, now throw the knife out of the open window,” the spectre instructed. “That way he won’t reach it.”

Dami’s breath hitched. Her hand clenched Tabi's own, even as Tabi's hand went slack. She stared ahead. Her mind, usually so quick, usually so locked onto anything and everything that could be of use or detriment to her, halted in its tracks. She hadn't... thought of that...

Evidently, neither had her sister.

“You’re gonna stab him, aren’t you.” Razor said. It wasn’t a question, she was looking at her knowingly.

“No she won’t. This is Dami we’re talking about!”

I'm sorry... I'll try to be quick.

“...yeah, no, she’s definitely going to stab him.”

Tabi took one look at Dami and immediately left the mouse. “Damiana, look at me.”

“Damiana’s not here. Come back later.”

“We know you wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t necessary.” Winnie reached.

“It’s not in you.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong!”

“It was self-defense!”

Dami shuddered. “I’m awful with a knife!”

“That’s fine!” Razor told her brightly. “I can teach you!”

“A few stab wounds are nothing compared to what I did,” Beast practically purred, “You’re okay.”

Dami emerged from the blanket nest to stare at the chimera, utterly befuddled. Tabi doubted it made her feel better. It didn't make Tabi feel good. Not at all. Mostly just dread.

She took a deep breath. Swallowed. And gave the go-ahead to keep playing.

They watched as the Princess on screen stabbed him in the chest with her eyes closed.

The Narrator

She plunges it into your chest, tearing through flesh and sinew. It is *agony*. But you aren't dead yet.

Oh no, I'm so sorry!

Tabitha couldn't help but wince. She had done the humane thing and given her controlled companion a quick death, not a butchery.

“Lesson one, honey: Look at where you’re stabbing. Lesson two: Don’t apologize! The key to it is having fun!”

What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck. Didn't Razor named herself that because of the aforementioned metal bones? Who had she been sharing a house with all this time?!

Voice of the Hero

Stay strong. We can tough it out until it's done. For her sake.

The Narrator

For *her* sake? Don't you start pretending that dying a painful death is some sort of heroic gesture. The two of you have literally doomed everyone.

"Not bad, Hero! Real tough, there!" Razor sounded genuinely amused.

“He means screaming will traumatize her more you absolute bellend-”

The Narrator

Whatever. She sinks the blade into your chest again, and again, and again... and you feel *every inch* of burning pain that slices its way into your body.

“He’s doing it on purpose.” The quintet blinked.

“What?” Beast looked at her.

Tabitha answered for them. “Look at those descriptions- he’s dragging it out. You’re not bad with a knife, Dami, he’s the one making this last.”

"He's mad he didn't get what he wanted," Winnie added.

"I get the sentiment," Thelka nodded to herself.

The ghost frowned. "Well, stay mad."

On screen, the sobbing Princess got covered in blood.

I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry!

Voice of the Hero

She doesn't know how to use a knife, does she?

"Shut up, Hero, I'm trying to comfort her!" that was Winnie, annoyed.

"Don't worry, Hero, we're working on it!" that was Razor, brightly.

"...sorry..." and that was Dami, behind the guilt and horror slightly embarrassed at how even someone in their death throws could tell her technique was awful.

The Narrator

Apparently not, though it doesn't matter how sloppy her knife work is, does it? A stab wound is still a stab wound, and it won't be long before you bleed out.

I'm so sorry!

The screen went black for a moment, before the Princess came back into view, staring down with blood everywhere on her. She knelt down, crying.

The Narrator

With one last thrust of the knife, your legs give out beneath you. You collapse to the floor, your blood pooling around you, your limbs unresponsive. The Princess stares down at your ruined chest as tears carve rivulets of pink down her blood-spattered cheeks.

Voice of the Hero

It can't just end like this, right?

The Narrator

Oh, that's rich coming from you. As much as I'd prefer for things to have gone differently, I can't deny the reality of what's happened. The two of you made your choice. It's over.

Everything goes dark, and you die.

The screen went black once more. Before anyone could start to process the entire *everything*, it lit up slightly once again.

Chapter II: The Damsel.

There was silence for a moment.

“...What?”

Chapter 3: Where we're from, there's no sun

Chapter Summary

The girls organize both a gamedate and a rescue.

Chapter Notes

A bit delayed, but here it is! Comments are appreciated as usual. Hope you enjoy it! Also if you know any good renpy tutorials...

The game had been put in a slight pause for the living room to be cleaned and the popcorn to be swept. As the one still with the mouse, Tabi had done everything she could to strong-arm Thelka into helping. It had not worked. The only thing that had been hurt was her pride, and that stung enough.

So there she was, losing herself in the mechanical actions. She could have done it while sleeping. Which, unfortunately, meant her thoughts were free to run wild.

She just couldn't stop thinking. She thought of the limb-locking nightmare that must have been the Narrator's control. She thought of that prison, of knowing even for those briefest of moments exactly what it meant to be someone's puppet.

"I had forgotten we met them before... my first time was completely different from yours, you know?" Ava was saying, lifting the entire couch so Tabi could sweep underneath. "I'd tell you, but I'm sure we will see it at some point. By the way, is this why you chose the name 'Damiana'? Because it's similar to 'Damsel'?"

"No," Dami answered, knelt down as she was, battling with a honey stain on the floor. "I just thought it was a good name- I had no idea I had a... title? Is that what that is? And why Damsel?"

Tabi busied herself by finishing sweeping the floor. As long as none of the girls had swept popcorn under the couch everything was fine. The implications of the titles were concerning, if just for the fact that she didn't know her own, and wasn't sure if she wanted to. Wasn't sure what, or who, it was that decided who was called what.

"Are you sure you don't want any tips?" Razor wondered, still sitting on the couch Ava had just placed back down. "I don't mind."

Even Razor had to see her smile was not reaching her eyes. “Very sure, thank you. But you don’t have to worry. From now on, everything will be smooth sailing.”

The ghost drifted past Tabitha without a word, the chill bringing her partially back to herself for a moment. She'd been sweeping the same spot on the floor for about a solid minute now. It was late. And there was the matter of their names now... if 'Damiana' had been so close to 'Damsel,' was that of her own will? Could it have just been a coincidence?... Tabitha hoped her name was chosen of her own will. Her certainty was a bit shaken.

“Everyone ready?” Plethora said, placing themselves back down on their spot. Tabitha's movements slowed, drearily, as she checked her work.

“As soon as Tabi finishes brooming the floor-”

“Sweeping,” Clara corrected, taking her spot as well.

Ava turned back to her while she sunk on the couch. It dipped down with an ominous creak. “Huh?”

“It’s called ‘sweeping’ the floor, not ‘brooming’.”

“Same thing!”

“You need any help over here?” The ghost asked, passing by again. If nothing else, the little chills up her spine were doing a good job of keeping her awake. She blinked twice, before looking back up at the ghost, translucent and incorporeal as she was.

‘Are you capable of helping with this?’ She took a breath to ask, but her mind moved quicker than her mouth. “Do you have a name?”

“Grace,” she answered promptly, a faint smile lighting up her features. The skin on her lips was cracked and chapped, Tabi realized. How odd. When she'd passed by her the past couple times, the spirit had felt like the mist on a lazy morning. She didn't seem the dry type.

“You said that fast.”

“I picked it out for myself early on,” Grace shrugged playfully, leaning away and twisting in the air. “I heard the word sometime, decided it sounded pretty enough that I might as well use it.”

That was everyone in the house, or at least the ones who entertained her, accounted for. That task and question was squared away, then; much like the floor. Tabi tried not to glare at Thelka for not helping with the cleanup. She did make an effort. Ultimately, she did not think she succeeded.

So, there they were back again, everyone in their places, more popcorn, some drinks, and in Tabi’s case, a pit in her stomach once more. In her pajamas and nightgowns, even. Back to it. On an impulse, she passed the mouse to Ava.

The Narrator

You're on a path in the woods. And at the end of that path is a cabin. And in the basement of that cabin is a Princess.

The Narrator

You're here to slay her. If you don't, it will be the end of the world.

“What the-? This again?” Ava spluttered indignantly as everyone read the same speech the Narrator had said from the beginning.

“I knew things repeated, but I didn’t know it was an actual loop,” Tabi commented, hands finally free to eat something. “Interesting. How do we break it?”

How had they broken it in the first place? Every one of the girls was there for a reason, so eventually the loop must have broken. There had to be a clue somewhere. He had died. Was that the boys’ collective power? Returning after death?

Not a power she would wish to have.

- (Explore) I'm getting a terrible sense of deja vu.
- (Explore) Wait... hasn't this already happened?
- (Explore) Okay, no.
- (Explore) But I died! What am I doing here?
- (Explore) Oh, you bastard! You're in for it now. I'm wise to your tricks!

Again, a lot of options.

“Sure would be nice to come back after death,” Grace commented.

“It’s not that hard, you just have to will yourself back up,” Ava waved her hand, more focused on choosing the last option on screen. “He’s in for it, yeah.”

Tabi - and most of the others - waited with bated breath for her to realize just who she told that too. The moment passed without her realizing it.

The Narrator

My tricks? What on earth are you talking about? We've just met for the first time.

Voice of the Hero

If He doesn’t remember what happened, maybe it’s best to keep it that way.

“He doesn’t remember?” Razor hummed, watching with interest.

“Or he’s a great liar.” Winnie countered, half sprawled on the floor. “He definitely remembers.”

“What purpose would that have?” Tabi interrupted. “If he really tried to make him ‘slay’ us, wouldn’t it be better if he leaned into the fact he died before?”

“That one clearly didn’t count, she was under duress.”

“Of course it counts!” Dami herself interrupted. “It has to count, I wouldn’t want that swept under the rug!”

Thelka’s attention was elsewhere. “Capitalized pronouns for the one who narrates? Interesting...”

Their collective attention was brought to a halt at the next spoken line, however.

Voice of the Smitten

Yes, He didn't approve of us last time, did He? If we're going to save our beloved, we'll have to be sneaky about it.

The artificial stillness that encompassed the room was broken by Winnie’s poorly disguised snort. “Oh I know who that is!”

“Do you? His voice is too loud for my liking...” Tabi muttered, sending an apologetic glance to Dami. She needn’t have bothered, unlike the first chapter, the girl looked positively radiant.

“That’s your boy?” Razor said with a smirk, though Tabi couldn’t quite tell if there was any malice behind it. “Smitten, huh? Aw, he thinks he’s in love. Cute.”

“Why isn’t anyone worried about the fact he’s also a voice?” Tabi decided to voice her feelings. It was just this side of unsettling.

“He’s not a voice anymore, is he?” Clara mused. “Even after getting his own body, he keeps visiting Damiana. That’s sweet.”

Voice of the Hero

Our... 'beloved?'

The Narrator

Yes, you'll have to be very sneaky about your intentions if you're going to try and save the Princess. Which, in case it isn't clear, is the exact opposite of what you should be doing.

“It didn’t work. Pity. It could have been fun to see how long they could keep the ruse going.” Clara said.

Voice of the Smitten

Ah, so all of the cards are on the table. Then you should know that we and the Princess are in love and the four of us will be foiling any and all assassination attempts you've got in the works.

Plethora snorted. “Sorry, he talks funny. Like an actor giving it his all.”

Winnie, still sprawled on the floor, was mastering the art of silent wheezes.

One of the quintet's heads was definitely giving it her all so she wouldn't laugh. One of the others kept talking, their lips twitching all the while, "I doubt Dami- I doubt she knew it'd be a package deal like with us... sorry.... ahaha..."

Tabi turned to her twin, "Is 'Smitten' his name?"

The room, aside from the glow of the screen, was dark, so Tabi couldn't be sure if there was an actual blush gracing Dami's cheeks. "The last time we spoke, he hadn't decided on a name yet. I do call him Dashing-"

There was an 'Ooooooh-' from, in Tabitha's opinion, the most immature of them, and surprisingly, from Grace too.

"- not to his face!"

The Narrator

We'll see about that. Whatever you do, just be sure to ignore *him*, specifically. It sounds like he's the sort who'd sacrifice the whole world for a peck on the cheek.

Voice of the Smitten

What can I say? A world without love is a world that isn't worth saving.

"He doesn't even deny it?" Winnie gaped. "Either Dashing here's a tremendously good actor or he's actually serious."

Dami turned her head to her, Mount Blankets reduced to Valley Of Blankets. "Of course he's serious, why wouldn't he be?"

"...I have so much to teach you."

"I like him, he's passionate!" Ava spoke up for the first time in a while. "And for the record, I agree with him."

"A world without love isn't worth saving... true enough." Thelka quoted, earning herself the stares of everyone in the room. Tabitha fought off a grin as Thelka balked; it was so rare an instance in which she *didn't* revel in being the center of attention. "What have I said? Love can move mountains and drive people to madness or devotion. It drives the world. I thought at least some of you understood that."

- Let's assume I'm telling the truth, and all of this really did already happen. Why should I listen to you? Why should I bother doing anything?
- [Proceed to the cabin.]
- [Turn around and leave.]

"What if we just turned around?" the Quintet asked, being silenced almost immediately by a chorus of negatives.

“Let me guess: You don’t want to just go straight to Dami, you want info, right?” Ava asked Tabi behind her. Naturally, she nodded, and Ava sighed deeply, and groaned louder when she saw the nods around the rest of the room. Having already predicted this. “This could be so simple. Get in, rescue the girl, get out. But fine. We’ll do it your way.”

The Narrator

Those are two very different questions, but fine. I’ll indulge you if that’s what it takes to get you moving.

Let’s say for a moment that this really is the second time you’ve met me, or, at least, a version of me.

If you’re back here, I’m assuming you died, which probably only happened because you didn’t listen to me.

Voice of the Smitten

You were the one who did us in, villain.

“I’m really liking your boy, Dami. Doesn’t ask too many questions, he knows what he wants... do you think he’d be up for a spar one of these days?” Ava wondered.

Dami startled. It was a few seconds before she answered. “I could ask him... or we could invite them here. All of them.”

Beast raised her head. “All of them?” Her voice was inquisitive, almost... enthusiastic? Her head lowered, but did not relax. Her eyes shone in the dark with anticipation, her voice deepening at the prospect. “Wonderful.”

Tabi decided to jump into that bandwagon. “This is about them too, and I’m sure everyone here has questions. And if they don’t want to answer we can keep playing, but they deserve to know. It’s only fair.”

“I’m against it.” Winnie said, tail puffing. “I will put into use what Razzle-Dazzle taught me if whoever was there with me tries anything.”

“We’re not letting anyone hurt anyone, okay? It’s not fun if they’re not into it.” Ava answered.

Thelka hummed to herself. “It would be nice to see the little bird again. He would have come here,” she said to a puzzled Grace, “but he kept saying he was unworthy of my presence. Being turned into a human must have been a shock, but I am getting impatient.”

“I would like to see mine too,” Clara voted, surprisingly Tabitha. She hadn’t spoken much of what she experienced before; she figured she did not have that good of relations with him. But now, her voice was a song, her tone a laugh. “Things added so abruptly between us! I did plan for us to keep in touch, and we have so much more we can do together.”

“We did not get much of a chance to truly know ours, in all his shapes,” Plethora reflected, their hands reaching to brush aside their hair from one of their faces. “If he would be obliged, we’d be happy to spend just a little more time together. We would enjoy showing him how well we’ve gotten to know ourselves, and to see if he has done the same in the time between our meeting and reunion.”

“Fairness is boring- but I do want to meet mine!” Razor chimed in eagerly. “Last time was fun!”

Grace sulked. “Oh, I know mine alright. It’s the others I want to see!”

“It’s settled then. Tomorrow, we’ll call them.”

Voice of the Hero

Well, not you in the literal sense, but you did everything you could to stop us from rescuing her.

The Narrator

Oh, I wonder why. Maybe it's because the entire world was at stake. No lone Princess is worth that price.

Voice of the Smitten

I beg to differ.

The Narrator

I'm not going to argue with you. I'm just going to take a deep breath and assume that whoever is making the decisions here has the common sense to *ignore* your protestations.

“Unfortunately, the one making the decisions here is me!” Ava cheered, and began chanting, “A-VA! A-VA! OI, OI-!”

Beast glared at her.

“-Oi,” Ava finished quietly.

The Narrator

Anyways, I believe your second question was 'what's the point of doing anything?' If you're asking that, it sounds to me like you're making the rather dangerous assumption that your actions last time around didn't have any consequences.

Voice of the Hero

What do you mean? Of course there weren't any consequences. You forced the Princess to kill us, and now everyone's right back to where they started. That sounds pretty consequence-free to me.

The Narrator

Yes, but, in this purely hypothetical scenario, that begs the question of how you got back here. Did 'time' simply rewind itself, or were you instead transported to a different world entirely?

If it's the latter, what do you think happened after you died?

Do you think the people there lived happily ever after, or do you think that the Princess, left unhindered, brought about the end to everyone and everything, just like I told you she would?

Voice of the Smitten

She would never. She's a perfect angel that you cruelly imprisoned as part of some convoluted, dastardly scheme.

The Narrator

Convoluted? I don't know how this premise could be any more simple. Princess bad. Stop her. Save everyone.

Tabi looked around the room. "Aren't we going to-?"

"It's too late to think about this shit," Winnie interrupted her. face halfway buried in the bowl of popcorn and candy she had managed to snatch.

"I wouldn't even know how to end the world!" Dami sprung up, glaring at the screen. Tabi thought she had never seen her so close to being frustrated.

"I say we don't listen to anything the narrator guy says. The more he talks, the more he confuses us." Ava said.

"If we did end worlds, it was in our nature to do it. You can't stop an earthquake, why stop us?" Thelka left the question floating in the air. Tabitha didn't know how to approach answering it, as evidently neither did anyone else.

- I'm with them. I'm going to find a way to save her from that cabin.
- Let's talk about this Princess...
- [Turn around and leave.]

"Wait, why didn't you keep interrogating him?" Tabi jumped up while Ava chose the first option.

"I'm sorry, who's the one making the decisions here?" she huffed. "I can only take so much, and Dashing there would agree with me."

"I guess that makes you the dashing heroine, Ava?" Clara said with a laugh.

"Damn right it does!"

Voice of the Hero

That's right. You can't stop all of us.

Voice of the Smitten

We're going to sweep her off her feet if it's the last thing anyone does.

The Narrator

Are these really the sorts of people you'd like to align yourself with? Sigh. You're not at the cabin yet. You still have plenty of time to reflect on the situation. I just hope for all our sakes that you make the right call.

“Before you say anything, I am ‘proceeding to the cabin.’ I’m tired of standing around.” Ava said, before doing just that and passing through the Narrator’s warning of lying and cheating.

Voice of the Smitten

We already told you we're not playing along with your little game, it's your lies that can't be trusted. Her beauty is the only thing in the world we can believe in!.

Voice of the Hero

I think we've already been over this. I'm pretty sure he just likes the sound of his own voice.

Voice of the Smitten

I do, but I also speak from the heart. My passions are too great to be stifled, they must be expressed!

Voice of the Hero

Sure, yeah, your passions are strong and all, but not everyone needs to hear them. Some things are better kept quiet.

The Narrator

Don't pay their bickering any mind. Focus on the task ahead.

“One of the things I don’t like about him: he does talk too much.” Ava commented, before proceeding to the cabin once again.

“Poor Braveheart sounds so tired and they haven’t even gotten there yet,” Grace giggled.

The Narrator

The interior of the cabin is clean and elegant, its stone walls draped in fine-threaded tapestries, a prison befitting a royal prisoner. The only furniture of note is an ornate wooden table with a pristine blade perched on its edge.

The blade is your implement. You'll need it if you want to do this right.

They looked at the interior of the cabin after the image appeared before them. The stone walls, the two tapestries, a heavy, yet ornate, wooden door. A tall mirror hanging on the leftmost wall.

Winnie's eyes bugged out and she nearly choked on the hard candy she was sucking on. "Holy SHIT! This is a nice place! Why couldn't mine be like that?"

"You have not seen mine yet." Thelka smirked.

"Still too empty." Ava said.

"Why is the interior stone but the exterior wood? The windows don't match in shape... but what if...?" Tabi was muttering to herself, too low for Dami to properly hear.

"The music changed," Grace noted, observant as always. It was more grandiose, more ethereal.

"The mirror doesn't have the squiggly lines." Dami commented.

- (Explore) You didn't say anything about the mirror on the wall.
- (Explore) [Approach the mirror.]
- (Explore) [Take the blade.]
- (Explore) [Enter the basement].

"I know, I'm approaching the mirror, see?" Ava's fingers twitched on the mouse.

The Narrator

You walk up to the wall next to the basement door. It's a wall. There isn't much to see here.

Voice of the Hero

What are you talking about? This isn't a wall. It's a mirror. Or at least it'll be a mirror once we wipe off that layer of grime.

"The worm can't see it? Intriguing." Thelka looked interested despite herself, absently munching on popcorn.

"I still think he's lying," Winnie said, putting herself in a more comfortable position as Ava selected the choice to wipe the mirror clean.

Once again, they saw a clawed hand, this time posed to wipe the grim off a mirror that disappeared between a breath and the next.

The Narrator

You reach forward and rub your hand against the cabin wall. I hope you know how ridiculous you look right now.

Voice of the Hero

But there was a mirror a second ago.

Voice of the Smitten

And now it's gone. Pity. We could have a feather out of place and now we'll never know. We can't gallantly sweep her off her feet if we have a feather out of place.

"I wouldn't care about that!" Dami protested, though she couldn't help smiling.

"I normally would take the blade," Ava said, turning to the room at large. "But I don't think Dami would appreciate that in the state she's in- besides, she needs a training session with me before I even consider fighting her."

The aforementioned woman's smile became just a bit strained, just a bit panicked. "Huh?"

"We're friends, and friends push each other to the limits," Ava said, like it made sense. "Thelka refuses because I don't know, Miss Primandproper," she nodded to Tabi, "Also doesn't want to, Razor says 'not yet' eternally, Winnie would just stab me again-"

"What do you mean 'again'?!"

"-shut it Tabitha, the Fantastic Five outnumber me so it wouldn't be fair, Gracie here straight up doesn't have a body, Nala doesn't have opposable thumbs-"

"What did you just call me?" Beast whipped around, her ears to the sides. Ava ignored her with such ease Tabitha was briefly jealous.

"-so that only leaves you. What do you say, sometime this week?"

"...if it makes you happy." said Damiana. Tabi saw her mouthing 'help'.

"Amazing," Ava smiled with all her teeth. "Now where was I- oh, yeah, no blade."

The Narrator

The door to the basement creaks open, revealing an intricate stairwell. Gold-trimmed carpet glimmers in the light of the torches positioned along the walls. The basement almost seems welcoming in the dim firelight.

But it's still a stone basement. If the Princess lives here, slaying her is probably doing her a favor.

"There's torches and a carpet?!" Winnie fumed once again.

"Nice basement you got there, Dami," Tabitha couldn't help herself. "Much better than mine."

The Narrator

A soft voice carries up the stairs.

H-hello? Is someone there?

“And here’s our Damiana!” Winnie, of all people, cheered.

Voice of the Smitten

Her voice... it's somehow even more beautiful than last time. I can hear wedding bells already...

“HUH?!” Dami squeaked as another, bigger ‘*Ooooooh~*’ went across the others. Tabi was reasonably sure even Clara had joined in that one.

Thelka leaned in from Throne Couch, “You could do a lot better- though he does give you the respect you deserve...”

“I agree,” Beast chirped. “There’s plenty of birds in the sky.”

“I don’t- a wedding?!?”

“Easy, Dami, I’m sure he wasn’t being serious,” Tabi tried to comfort her. Honestly, he better not have been serious. That was moving just a little too quick for her tastes. He hadn’t even managed to get her *out* of the cabin yet, could he pump the breaks a little until they’d navigated the survival scenario they were in?

Voice of the Hero

I’ve held my tongue ‘til now, but you’re taking this a little too far. We barely even know the Princess. We can still do right by her without all this over-the-top fawning.

The Narrator

Yes. For everyone’s sake, you’re not in love. Sigh. Just remember that her charms are all part of the manipulation.

“Still going for the manipulative angle? Can’t fault him, I mean look at me,” Winnie said.

“Sorry about that- I hadn’t been expecting wedding talk, is all,” Dami smiled.

“You would look wonderful in white.” Clara commented.

Was Tabitha the only one here who agreed with Hero? She felt a sudden sense of kinship to him. “Let’s wait until we *know each other’s names* before we start worrying about these things.” She sent a pointed look to Dami, wholly aware that at the present moment, Dami still didn’t know Sir ‘Dashing’s’ name quite yet.

Once again, there were the Narrator’s words of how they locked eyes with the Princess, and the chain around her wrist.

There was a carpet, of all things, on the floor, and Tabi couldn't help the slightest stir of jealousy. But what difference would a carpet make? At the end of the day, a carpet or an additional chain weren't that useful. Just decorations. Set piece- wait.

"Why is the window so big? Why can you see the sky from there, shouldn't there be the ground? Grass? We're in a basement!" Tabi blurted out.

"That's what you focus on and not the carpet?" Razor said.

"No, she's right," Beast rumbled. "It's low enough she could have, not escaped, but gone outside if she wanted to."

Dami blushed. "I didn't think of that?" she had been too dizzy with relief over what her surroundings changing would mean (no more rotting corpses!) than escaping at all. Besides, she had missed him.

Clara blinked at the girl on the screen. "I love your dress!"

Dami returned the smile. "Thank you!"

Voice of the Smitten

My love! We're here to rescue you from your unjust and foul imprisonment!

The Narrator

You know she can't hear you, right?

Voice of the Smitten

She may not be able to hear my words, but surely, she can hear my spirit.

The Narrator

Oh, your spirit's plenty loud, alright.

Thelka turned to the aforementioned ex princess, eyes almost noticeably wide. "Could you?"

"Hear him?" Dami completed the thought. "I couldn't."

"Would've been awkward if you could," the Quintet said.

"It's not that bad," Grace smiled. "Trust me. Just loud."

Tabitha made a mental note about Grace's apparent experiences. Thelka, too, apparently, though Tabitha was only interested in making conversation with the former.

it's you! My dashing hero. I was so worried you wouldn't come back.

Voice of the Smitten

Did you hear that? She said we're dashing!

Voice of the Hero

And she called us a hero!

The Narrator

Flattery really goes a long way with the two of you, doesn't it?

“And that’s how ‘Dashing’ started?” Razor said.

“Somehow you managed to say exactly the right thing for both of them to be swayed. That takes talent!” Winnie commented.

“Especially since she didn’t know they were there,” Ava agreed.

The Narrator

But... 'waiting for you to come back?' I didn't want to believe your ravings back in the woods, but this is next to incontrovertible evidence. You've been here before.

Voice of the Smitten

That's right, villain. And you killed us.

Voice of the Hero

Well... she killed us.

Voice of the Smitten

Only because he made us try and kill her! It was self-defense. Our beloved's hands remain unstained by cruelty.

“That’s what we said,” Thelka interrupted, “If your bird forgives you, then you should be able to forgive yourself.”

“I guess that makes sense...” Damiana agreed.

Tabi was sure this was not the end of it, however. Damiana was very conflict-averse.

The Narrator

And you've died before. So an entire world has been damned to oblivion. I'd really hoped I'd be the first... but what's done is done. What matters is you have a chance to do it right this time.

Voice of the Hero

We... damned a whole world? But everything reset.

The Narrator

"Nothing 'resets.' You're just somewhere else, and you can't keep hopping between worlds forever. Especially not without leaving a trail of incomprehensible devastation behind you. Sigh. This is horrible.

Voice of the Smitten

Horrible for you, maybe, but we've been given another opportunity to sweep her off her feet and treat her like the lady she is.

"This is horrendous," Tabi mumbled. "He either saves one of us, or entire worlds end. I don't know if I could make the same choices he did. Two whole worlds for each of us. And we're all here, so he saved all of us."

"Maybe it's not true," Winnie argued, still gripping her bowl. "We only have the narrator's word."

"But we would have no way to check, the cabin would not let us." Beast joined in.

"I told you it was a curse!" Dami argued, gesticulating so passionately Tabi would have been smacked if she didn't dodge. "Us ending the world, the boys being birds, the looping... he must have found a way to break it! Good, too, we like the world."

"We like this world," Grace pointed out. "For all we know, our original worlds weren't good."

"Oh, I could still make some renovations to this world," Thelka muttered.

"Agreed," said Clara. "But this is nice for now."

Voice of the Hero

Now hold on. If she actually ended a world... are you sure we want to do this? Are you sure we want to rescue her?

Voice of the Smitten

We never saw a world end. And now I'm even more certain that we must chase our heroic and romantic destiny than I've ever been. I shan't let anyone convince us otherwise!.

The Narrator

Are you listening to him? He's lost it. Don't let him distract you, just do your job..

"Hero, come on, I was starting to root for you!" Winnie threw a handful of snacks at the screen, annoyed.

"He's being cautious. It's a lot of information to process all at once, give him a break," Tabi felt the need to defend the voice that was the voice (heh) of reason.

“She’s still an unknown, and you did chew through your arm last time. He’s being wise.” Beast added, eyes and ears fixed on the screen.

“Sweet-heart is still dead set in freeing you.” Grace was smiling.

“His determination is charming.” Thelka nodded. “I believe I would like to meet him too.”

“...I suddenly want Dashing to read one of those old-timey books Grace is so fond of. Can you imagine him doing the voices?” the Quintet, as one, were repressing laughs.

- (Explore) "You killed me last time and it hurt a lot! Why did you do that?"
- (Explore) "I didn't bring a knife. Do I have to cut you out again?"
- (Explore) "What happened after I died?"
- (Explore) "I have to ask... did you end the world after you killed me back there?"
- (Explore) "I'm sorry about what happened last time. The Narrator who sent me here to kill you took over my body. It was extremely unfair."
- [Rescue the Princess.]

Tabi just turned to Ava with her hands clasped at chest level. “Just one ‘explore’ option, come on.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “We have the Damsel herself here to answer those questions!”

“I kinda want to know too.” Winnie said, crawling over to them. Tabitha felt Dami shifting beside her as Winnie reached them.

“...really, is that your strategy?” Ava’s lips twitched. “Triple puppy dog eyes?”

Tabi blinked. “I do not do puppy dog eyes!”

“Yes you do.” Grace commented.

“You are doing it right now.” Razor agreed.

Beast and Thelka were trying not to laugh behind her hands. Or claws, in Beast’s case.

“No, Gracie, don't you dare join the puppy eye squad, I'm doing it! Alright, alright, I'll pick the world ending option,” Ava laughed good-naturedly.

Winnie smirked triumphantly and held up her hands. Both twins high-fived her, Dami enthusiastically, Tabi anything but.

- (Explore) "I have to ask... did you end the world after you killed me back there?"

I don't know. Was I supposed to have ended the world? Would that have made you happy?

“Dami?” Razor turned completely incredulous eyes to her. “What?”

“That didn’t happen when I got rescued,” Damiana defended herself. Just in case, Tabi took one of her hands in hers.

Winnie was almost sparkling. “I see... you want to be freed, so you’ll just agree to what he says so he lets you out faster! That’s clever!”

“It’s not like that, Winifred!” Dami snapped, (‘Do NOT call me that!’, Winnie pouted), “I wanted to leave, and I wanted to make him happy because- well I did kill him!”

“That’s not very healthy.” Tabi mused.

“I don’t think anything in that situation was healthy.” Grace said.

Voice of the Smitten

Isn't that just like our darling Princess? She wants to make us happy! My heart melts further with every word that passes through her beautiful lips.

The Narrator

Are you listening to her? That's a confession.

“Not a confession, an appeasement.” Thelka said.

“Sweet-heart got the ‘make you happy’ thing very quick,” Grace interjected. “He’s very in tune with you.”

Tabitha's skin was crawling. Something about the way Smitten spoke just... felt *wrong*. As if he only spoke in service of Dami. And now he was picking out the pieces of her he liked most... she shivered. She hoped that was the end of what 'his passions' had to say about her sister's lips.

Ava snorted at the screen. “Girls, how do we feel about the world ending?”

- "No? I don't want the world to end."
- "I have no feelings one way or the other about the world ending."
- "Honestly, the world sucks. People are a plague and I hope you brought a slow and painful ruin to them all."
- [Remain silent.]

“I’m sure Damiana could end the world if she wanted to,” Thelka opined from her ‘throne’.

“Killing it with kindness, maybe,” Winnie said. “Choose to not say anything, that way we’ll get her feelings on the matter.”

“You guys are being mean, of course I didn’t end the world! We’re still talking!” Dami protested.

“Don’t say anything.” Grace said, a sentiment echoed by Tabi.

“You are underestimating Dami, of course she could end the world! Have you seen her knit? If she thinks she can do it, she can.” Razor said.

“I would say yes to the world ending, but I want to know how you really feel. Say nothing,” Clara said, her eyes narrow behind the mask. Beast chuffed in agreement.

“I don’t think she could end the world.” Ava said. “But alright, we say nothing.”

On the screen, the woman chained looked away for a little while.

The Narrator

The Princess' eyes quiver as she waits for your response.

I... didn't? End the world?

I didn't end the world!

The Narrator

She's clearly just saying what she thinks you want to hear.

Voice of the Smitten

Or she's innocent. How could a beauty like her be capable of ending the world? It's not rational!

“I suppose that’s the best we could get,” Tabi sighed.

“At least we know Dami is a good person at heart, unlike some other people...” Winnie muttered.

“Was that ever in question?” the Quintet asked. “Pass me the candy.”

“No, but it’s good to have it confirmed.” Winnie passed the candy to them.

“Alright, time to rescue her!” Ava announced, pressing that option without a gram of hesitation.

The Narrator

Rescue her? What are you talking about? Did you forget that she's a world-ending monstrosity? And even if you wanted to unleash her onto the world, despite the complete moral disaster that would be, you'd have to get her out of those chains. Good luck with that!

Voice of the Smitten

Don't you see how dainty her hands are? We'll be able to slip her out with ease.

“Dami,” Tabi said, slowly. “I love you, but if it’s that easy for you, I’m going to be very mad.”

Beside her, Dami tensed, which was all the answer she needed. “At me?”

“Not at you!” she was quick to say. “At fate, I suppose. At the narrator. At whatever was responsible.”

Damiana breathed in and out, her hair partially hiding her from view. “Okay. Okay, thanks for the warning.”

The Narrator

No! She's a prisoner here. You can't just slip her hand through the chains!

Voice of the Smitten

Don't you see how dainty her hands are? We'll be able to slip her out with ease.

Voice of the Hero

If her hands could just slip out of the chains, why hasn't she done it already?

“I missed him. If there was any chance to see him again, I knew I had to stay there.” Dami explained.

The pit that opened in Tabi's stomach was not at all helped by the thing 'Dashing' chose to say next.

Voice of the Smitten

Because we've yet to present her with her freedom.

Voice of the Hero

I'm not sure I follow.

Voice of the Smitten

Would you rather believe me, a passionate heart guided by love and my own good nature, or would you rather believe the devil on your shoulder who tells you what you can and cannot do?

Voice of the Hero

I think I'd rather believe in facts.

Voice of the Smitten

Ah, so you're one of those empiricists.

Voice of the Hero

One of us has to be.

Voice of the Smitten

Then let me show you a brand new truth. Narrator! We courageously step forward and free our beloved from her bindings.

“He has a high opinion of himself, doesn’t he?” Grace said, munching on chocolate now that she had figured out how to stay solid enough to do it. “He’s completely convinced he’s a good person.”

Dami turned to her. “Isn’t he?”

“Maybe,” the spectre conceded, “But it’s still a dangerous mindset to have.”

Tabi did agree with that. In fact, she more than agreed with it. Somehow, the thing Smitten said was *worse* than Dami's answer; not that she cared for him to an unhealthy degree, understandable if worrying, but instead that she hadn't been given permission to leave? Was she seriously hearing that correctly?... And she didn't know *what* to think about any of the rabble afterwards. “I think Dashing lost it.”

“You did not pay attention to me before?” Thelka asked. “I told you, love makes the world do great things, terrible things. In his case, he loves so much he can make things happen.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, where’s the logic in that?!” Tabi turned to her fully.

“From the moment we knew there was a narrator, normal logic was thrown out of the window. Think more in story logic.”

The Narrator

No. I can't let you do that. If you take another step towards the Princess, I'll—

Voice of the Hero

You'll what? Take over our body and force us to try and kill her?

The Narrator

I would if you had a weapon.

Voice of the Smitten

Not on my watch, villain! My passions contain titanic depths, and if you try anything that might harm our dearest I will end our life without a second thought.

“NO!” Tabi almost fell off her seat entirely when Dami shouted so loud her ear rang for a moment. Her eyes were wide, her hand gripping Tabi’s so hard it was painful. “I don’t want you to do that- I would never want you to do that! No matter what happens to me!”

“If the object of his devotion is lost, then it just stands to reason he would remove himself from the situation. That’s what followers do.” Thelka said beneath Damiana’s yells.

“He’s not a fo- I wouldn’t want him to do that!” Dami turned to her, eyes fierce.

Thelka was unimpressed. "Have you told him that?"

All at once, all the electric energy she seemed to possess went out of her. "No. I haven't. I want him happy, and he wants me happy, so we don't talk about before."

"Then tell him, it's that easy." Winnie said.

"It's not that simple!"

The Narrator

You wouldn't.

Voice of the Smitten

I would!

Voice of the Hero

I'd listen to him if I were you. He has a lot of strong feelings. And doesn't the world end if we don't stop her?

The scene changed once more, to depict the Princess being helped out of her shackle by the one rescuing her. The shackle went past her wrist like it was nothing.

"...are you kidding me?" Winnie gnashed her teeth. "That easy? I'm happy for you, Dami, but..."

"You're jealous? That's fine, I am too, a little." Grace tried her best to comfort her. It didn't quite work.

"I'm actually not mad," Tabi blurted out, to her surprise. "I just wish that could have been me."

"This seems too easy," Ava pouted. "Where's the conflict?"

"I'm with Ava here, where's the bloodshed?" That came from none other than Razor.

The Narrator

Sigh. You approach the Princess and gingerly slide her hand from her bindings. That... shouldn't have worked. I'll be damned. We're doomed.

Voice of the Hero

I can't believe it. But I guess I have to.

Voice of the Smitten

I told you! There's no life more worth living than that of a true believer.

“Your bird and mine could be friends,” Thelka blurted out. “They are surprisingly similar yet very different.”

“I think he’s friends with almost everyone in his group...” Damiana trailed off, unsure.

“At least this being so easy means we’ll get to see the narrator being annoyed.” The quintet smirked.

“Yes, the bossy one deserves it,” Grace said.

“I’m with Hero, I can’t believe it!” Tabi gaped at the screen, glaring like it had personally offended her. Had logic been thrown completely out the window? Why was *Smitten* more in control of the situation than the one who was acting with any semblance of rationality?

“Me neither. It’s just not fair!” Winnie grumbled, offering her some candy in solidarity. She took three and popped them in her mouth.

The screen changed slightly, the Princess without a shackle, smiling joyfully.

I'm free! And you're not trying to kill me this time! Thank you, thank you so much!

The Narrator

The Princess jumps up and smothers you in a joyful embrace. Eugh.

“Awww...” came from some at the image of the princess on the screen, smiling.

Ava turned to Dami and extended one arm. Damiana wasted no time lunging towards her, giggling at her one-armed hug.

“What? I have to play my role!” Ava laughed at Tabitha’s raised eyebrows.

The Narrator

If only you had a weapon. One slip of the wrist and your pristine blade would be buried in her back, and everyone out there would be saved.

Voice of the Hero

Luckily for mister romance, we don't have a weapon.

Voice of the Smitten

Who needs a weapon when we have the power of love on our side?

The screen, once again, changed to the Princess standing there, hands clasped in front of her.

“‘Mister romance’, that’s a good one.” Winnie snickered.

“The narrator didn’t even try to take control this time,” Tabi noted.

“The fledging got new plumage, it won’t be that easy this time. Especially with the lovestruck fool there.” Beast opined.

...What do we do now?

“Damiana, a word of advice,” Thelka leaned in. “Stand taller next time, instead of asking what to do, just do it.”

“Good luck with that, I’ve been trying to teach her that for two months.” Tabi rolled her eyes, before smiling nervously at a scowling Damsel. “But you’re making great progress! I didn’t even think you could get angry when I met you!”

- "What do you want to do?"
- "We leave. And then we have our whole lives to figure out what we want to do next."

“Sorry, Dami, but I’m tired of ‘exploring’. Plus, you did want to leave, didn’t you?” Ava said.

Dami nodded happily as her screen counterpart said ‘That sounds perfect!’

Razor snorted at the change in screen, at the Princess and the rescuer holding hands. “Are sparks coming out of you? Why?”

“Why not?” the aforementioned woman countered, leaving Razor to ponder the ‘why’ indeed.

“This is more entertaining than some of the books here,” Clara said, eating popcorn... somehow.

The Narrator

The Princess takes your hand, the last hopes of the entire world slipping through your fingers as they intertwine with hers.

Voice of the Smitten

We have each other. We don't need the world for our happy ending.

The Narrator

I like to think that you do, actually..

Voice of the Hero

Look, I had my doubts, but the choice has been made, and this is happening. You don't have to mope about it.

The Narrator

I will mope about it, because moping is the only recourse you loveblind fools have left me with.

You and the Princess walk up the stairs, hand in hand. Ugh. Look at the way she's smiling at you. She doesn't have to be so happy about this.

“Plethora was right, watching him get mad is very entertaining.” Winnie smiled. Some of the Quintet smiled back.

“Braveheart is just along for the ride now.” Grace laughed.

“Aw, Dami, you look so happy!” Tabi said as the screen, once more, changed. Hand in hand, the two on the screen walking up the basement stairs towards their freedom. The smile the Princess on the screen had was mirrored by Damiana herself.

Voice of the Hero

And what happens after we walk up the stairs?

The Narrator

Let's see. Oh, isn't that interesting? The door slams in your face. And the lock clicks.

Voice of the Hero

That's a familiar move.

The Narrator

Did I do that last time? Then you should know that you won't be able to leave.

None of them scowled at the sight of the closed door and the Princess' confused face. They just had a feeling.

Oh, no! Did someone lock us in here? That's not fair! We're supposed to leave now.

Voice of the Smitten

She's right. It isn't fair. But the unfairnesses of the world are no match for the strength of true love.

The Narrator

Enough with this true love nonsense. You just met her!

Voice of the Smitten

Of course you wouldn't understand, our passions run deeper than anything you have ever known.

The Narrator

Are you listening to this? You don't have to go along with the every whim of that delusional voice.

“I don’t necessarily agree with the whole ‘love conquers all’ thing,” Tabi said, “But I can’t deny it gets things done in this situation.”

Ava barely glanced at the choice screen that popped up, asking if the door should be opened by the Princess, together, or by him. “Let’s do it together!” she grinned while the Princess on the screen agreed.

“She really leaned into the role, amazing,” Grace whispered to Winnie, who bit her lip to not laugh. Neither of them had been expecting that.

The Narrator

Like a pair of teenagers in love, you and the Princess place your hands on the door... together... blegh.

Voice of the Smitten

And...?

The Narrator

... The lock clicks and the door creaks open. Are. You. Kidding me?

Voice of the Smitten

I told you our love was insurmountable!

“HA!” Ava cheered as the screen depicted, first the door opening, then both of them out of the basement, finally. “You were right, that narrator could do nothing!”

“I told you, once a worm always a worm,” Thelka said with satisfaction.

“Like a pair of teenagers’... are we teenagers?” Tabi couldn’t help but ask.

“Do I look like a teenager to you?” Thelka sneered.

“Or I like a juvenile?” Beast joined in.

“How am I supposed to know?”

The Narrator

The blade, that's right! There's still a chance for you to do the right thing. Take the blade from the table and slay her before it's too late!

Razor smiled at the two choices, slaying the Princess or not. “Can we..?”

“I’d be expecting that, but this is Dami we’re talking about. I made her do my chores for the first week before Grace gave me an earful. She doesn’t deserve that,” Winnie said.

“But-”

“No,” surprisingly, it was Ava who said that.

Razor tilted her head in confusion. “I thought you of all people would be into that.”

“I said I was saving her and I will. Plus, it wouldn’t be a fair fight! No, we’re not doing that.”

“Guys, Dami is right here!” Tabi hissed at them.

The Narrator

You're enjoying this, aren't you? You're enjoying taking every opportunity you can to draw out the end of the world and make me suffer. I hate you.

That's the way out. We're going to leave together, just like you wanted!

“Just like *you* wanted, Dami,” Tabi felt the need to emphasize.

The Narrator

Yes, I suppose you are going to do that, aren't you? You cross the room, opening the door to the cabin.

And then you step outside.

Voice of the Smitten

Our happy ending at last.

We did it! What should we do now?

Without missing a beat, Ava jumped out of the couch, grabbed Damiana and lifted her into a bridal carry.

“Hey, Dashing said to sweep you off your feet, and I’m doing that!” Ava laughed.

“I don’t think that’s what it means!” Dami laughed too, giving her a kiss on the cheek. The room was dark, and Ava’s skin was pinker than hers, so she couldn’t be sure she blushed as she gave her a wide grin. Winnie whooped as yet another ‘*Ooooooh-*’ went through the girls.

Tabi wasn’t joining in the celebrations just yet. There was something wrong with the image on screen. The background looked odd, and the Damsel looked tired.

“Ava, put her down. Dami, what else do you remember?”

The hulking woman sat back down and placed Damiana beside her.

“I think I must’ve fallen asleep right there. I don’t remember much else, to be honest.” Dami answered.

“You do look tired,” Clara agreed, looking critically at the screen.

“Where are the trees?” Winnie frowned, leaning in.

“It’s all shadow.” Grace said.

Voice of the Hero

... Where did everything go?

... Where did He go?

Voice of the Smitten

Oh, is he gone? I hadn't noticed. I was too busy staring deep into our beloved's eyes.

I'm cold. Is being happy supposed to be so cold?

Voice of the Smitten

She's cold? Quick, our feathers! Pluck them all and weave her a coat worthy of a Princess!

Nobody said anything. The Princess on the screen looked beyond exhausted, with deep bags under her eyes.

That’s what they saw before hands materialized out of nowhere as the Princess slumped into sleep, before retracting into themselves, taking her with them. And the world onscreen went black.

“What was that?!” Winnie jumped up, tail puffing as she almost hissed the words.

Dami wasn’t saying anything, eyes fixed on the screen.

“Something took you!” Tabitha gasped. What *was* that? Hands, yes, she could see, but *how* and *from where*? Where had they taken her sister and how was she brought back?

The dread that had taken hold of her from the very start of the Chapter held her tight in its palm now. But it was intensified, strengthened, by such an oddly familiar unknown. The cold... she couldn't recall anything beyond it, beyond a glimpse of the outside and a horrible numbing that ran through her body. Her memories fell away from her into a deep, empty abyss beyond that point; covered by a film she couldn’t peel away. She itched and scratched at it, searching for a place to pry herself open, but found nothing. Like it'd been scooped out, a blind spot in her psyche. It horrified her to realize she couldn't think about it at all, her mind skipping at the edges, like a roll of film with a whole section cut out. She didn't even remember falling asleep, like Damiana had. (God, she hoped that was sleep. It had to have been, right? She was here now. How did she wake up?)

“I don’t... what is this?” Razor, for once, wasn’t exuberant, wasn’t grinning.

“I don’t like this...” Thelka said, her eyes not leaving the screen.

The quintet stood in contemplation, faint recognition in their features.

Grace's brow furrowed in thought, but she wasn't saying anything, just gently floating to the floor, where she stayed.

Beast's fur was on end, livid as she half-crouched and a growl tore out of her.

Ava frowned at the screen. She clicked again, only because she didn't know what else to do. It wouldn't be fixed by hitting something.

There were words on the screen, center aligned, not ones they had seen so far. And, in the center of the nothingness, a very familiar mirror.

But you don't get the chance to make that jacket. Something has taken her away, and it's left something else in her place.

Voice of the Hero

She's gone. Where did she go? Should we try and find her?

And is that a... mirror? Why is it here? Why now?!

"He's terrified..." Clara said, and if Tabi didn't know better she would have said the woman was enraptured.

The music, if it could be called that, was not helping their nerves any. It was less music and more a low, droning tone.

Dami was tense and Tabi wasn't much better. What had happened and where were they now? She was worried about the fate of them. How they would get out of wherever this was, too.

- (Explore) I don't know where she went, and I don't know how we'd even go about looking for her.
- The Narrator is gone....
- (Explore) I think I'm supposed to look at the mirror.
- [Approach the mirror.]

"Poor man is scared. The least we could do is telegraph our intentions." Ava said. "Maybe if we break it, he'll feel better."

Voice of the Hero

There's something dreadful about it. I- I don't think you should.

Voice of the Smitten

Yes, I fear that we won't like what we'll see. What if we just sit here and preen for a while? That can't hurt, right?

"This is idiotic, I don't want to look at that if they're so scared. Even Dashing's scared!" Ava sucked air between her teeth.

Tabi felt her heart going a steady 100 bpm. "I don't think there's another choice to be made."

Ava's shoulders slumped as she selected to approach the mirror. "I'm sorry..."

Voice of the Hero

I'm begging you, don't do this.

Ava winced, muttering apologies and silently indignant that the only choice in that situation was to ignore them.

You approach the mirror.

Silence as you reach forward. They're gone, but the mirror remains. It's time for you to see what's in it.

"...did I just kill them? Permanently kill them? Why would they be silent now? What do you mean 'gone'?" Ava was not taking this well, but she clicked once again, before Tabi could try to think of anything to comfort her. "I feel like I need to apologize for real."

The reflection they saw was of a scaly hand hiding the features of a face, two white eyes shining from the darkness, and an 'It's you'.

You are alone in a place that is empty. It is quiet here.

"So this is the thanks he got for saving Dami? For saving me?" Tabitha couldn't believe it.

"I know we got different points of view here, but I think it was deserved with me," Winnie finally seemed to get over her shock. "Can't say this seems very fun..."

"There has to be a better reward for helping me ascend than just emptiness. I'll make it so somehow." Thelka said.

"What- Proceed To The Cabin?" Ava's jaw dropped. "This again? Another cabin, another us? Where are the boys then?" she puzzled as she clicked the lone option.

The screen faded to reveal a sort of hill in the permanent nothingness, and in the very top they could see the old Damiana, inside of what appeared to be...

"Is that fire?!" Razor jumped. "Let's get her out!"

"Something's odd. The music changed once again." Beast said, dropping back to her sofa. The music had indeed changed, a slow piano solo and a lone female voice accompanying it.

"Sounds like your singing, Thelka." Grace tried to smile.

"This is not the cabin, why does it say 'You're at the cabin?'" one of the Quintet said. The others had their eyes wide. Astonishment, realization, Tabi couldn't say.

“Yes, ‘approach her’ indeed. Heroine in bloody armor, part two.” Ava clicked on that option so hard Tabi was scared for the poor mouse.

Somehow, what they found once the screen lightened once again was worse. The one who Damiana had been, trapped between they didn’t know how many hands. Two of them grabbing her arms, a few keeping her aloft, two covering her eyes, the last one moving her mouth to speak.

Something finds me in the Long Quiet and brings me the gift of a fragile vessel.

“Like a puppet,” Clara tilted her head, as if searching for the strings.

Tabitha shuddered. “A vessel? Dami isn’t a vessel!” she told the screen like it would answer her.

“She’s sleeping. Damiana was fine then, and is fine now.” Beast said.

“Does she look fine to you?!” Ava rounded on her.

“She looks like she’s sleeping, to me.” the chimera said.

- (Explore) "What are you?"
- (Explore) "The gift of a fragile vessel?"
- (Explore) "Is this the end of the world?"
- (Explore) "Let her out of there!"
- (Explore) "Do you know the Narrator?"
- (Explore) "Are you what sent me to slay the Princess? Are you what trapped me here?"
- (Explore) "Do you know about the worlds beyond this place?"
- (Explore) "Are you the Princess?"
- (Explore) "Do we know each other?"
- (Explore) "What happens now?"
- [Attack the entity.]
- [Destroy your body]

“I hate having so many options. Why are there so many questions? I want to let her out and that’s it!” Ava glowered.

“I agree, let her out of there.” Winnie said.

“Don’t attack first, try talking. It could fight back- look at all those arms!” Tabi leaned forward.

“It’s not like birdface has the blade to slice through them either.” Razor agreed.

- (Explore) "Let her out of there!"

I’m sorry. There are some changes that can never be undone, there are some tears that can never be unshed. This is not a place that can hold a fragment of a concept. The moment she arrived here, she was going to return to me.

I promise that it doesn't hurt.

“Why does that thing sound like us?” Clara wondered.

“Because it’s using Dami’s mouth to speak?” Tabitha couldn’t believe that was an actual question.

“It’s not exactly her voice! It’s drowsier.” Clara argued.

“And that’s not Dami either.” Grace said, “I had my own body for company, and by now I want to think I know the difference between sleep and death. That body isn’t her anymore,” she stole an apologetic glance at Damiana. “And you know it, don’t you?”

Wordlessly, Damiana nodded. “I do. I had to see him die too.”

Tabi graced herself with five seconds to process the enormity of everything before going back to another point. “Dami isn’t a fragment of a concept, that’s insulting.”

“Whoever that thing is, she’s an ascended being. The little bird might be nothing more than an ant to her.” Thelka suggested, alternating between the being on the screen and everyone else.

“And she’s lying- or maybe she doesn’t know she’s lying,” Winnie conceded. “She said Dami and whoever that is couldn’t be separated... and here we are.”

“It doesn’t seem too bad, being there.” Damiana said. “It seems almost nice. Comfy, even.”

“I’ll still try to save you.” Ava promised.

- [Attack the entity.]

Your will cuts across the entity in front of you, but nothing happens.

My roots burrow in an ocean beyond your sight. We cannot harm each other as we are now.

Ava gaped at the screen, by some miracle of self control managing to not throw the mouse at the screen. “THAT’S BULLSHIT, Sleeping Beauty!”

Tabi turned to the resident spirit. “Do you think she’s like you? Incorporeal somehow?”

Grace didn’t even waste a single second. “Oh, yes.”

“Neither of them can harm the other?” Winnie wondered.

“Fine, she wins, let’s talk.” Ava grumbled. “This sucks! What’s a vessel?”

- (Explore) "The gift of a fragile vessel?"

Yes. Nerves and fibers to feel the worlds beyond. Perspectives to make my own.

This one is soft and delicate. You molded her to love you, and she'll make for a gentle heart.

Do not mourn her. She has served her purpose.

Damiana blinked, unsure what to feel about her descriptor. “Thank... you?”

Tabi was liking this less and less. “We’re not nerves and fibers, we’re people! And don’t give me that about her being a higher being, Thelka! This must have happened to you, too!” she whirled around to find Thelka only starting to open her mouth.

“That’s impossible.” she said instead. “Once you see me as I was you will understand why.” She did appreciate a good story and she was not about to spoil the most important part, her part in this.

“Why did she say Dami was molded?” Plethora wondered aloud.

“‘Do not mourn her’, oh my god we killed her,” Winnie went white. “She went out of the cabin and we killed her. The world dissolved and she died.”

“No, I don’t think she’s dead, if she’s a ‘perspective’ then it must be part of whatever this is.” Plethora opined.

“That’s not much better. I don’t see any traces of Dami there.” Grace objected. Tabi reached out to pull her back from phasing into the screen. Her hand went still with cold.

“I must be there somewhere. Teaching her to love, I think?” the delicate girl said. “So maybe not dead but... dreaming? Can the dead dream?”

“Yes they can.” Grace answered with a little sardonic smile.

“I still don’t like this.” Ava said.

- "What happens now?"

Nothing, as we are. But I know that there are worlds beyond us, and that we are meant to reach them.

There is no exit, but this vessel is a creature of perception. She can make you forget, if only you believe her to be able to.

Bring me more perspectives, so that I may be whole, and perhaps then we will know our freedom.

Ava’s growl was such that most of the others looked at Beast first. “‘Bring me more women that I can devour so I gain their experiences!’ That’s what she’s saying! Very trustworthy!” one of her hands balled into a fist.

“A creature of perception, huh..?” Tabitha wondered. That felt like a big piece of the puzzle, if they had all been originally intended to be just pieces of the whole (and god, if that didn’t make her want to be sick) and they were all so very different...

“Ava- no, don’t tell her that you’ll find a way to kill her, making her resent us is NOT a good idea!” Winnie jumped up and strayed the mouse from where it had been.

- (Explore) "Aren't you scared that I'll find a way to kill you?"
- (Explore) "How much will I forget?"
- (Explore) "And what if I don't let you do this to me?"
- (Explore) "I was sent to slay the Princess to stop her from destroying the world. If I help you, is that what you're going to do?"
- [Destroy your body.]
- "Okay. Make me forget."

“The amount of times that ‘destroy your body’ has appeared worries me.” Tabi said as she watched Ava pick the option to ask how much they would forget. It was, all in all, a pretty good question.

Everything, until we meet again.

“I think I should have expected that.” Razor said.

Without hesitation, Ava picked to make them forget.

She asks that I tell you to remember her.

You won't.

Everything goes dark, and you die.

Dami had been opening her mouth, possibly to reassure her that she was still there, but they all jumped with the exceedingly loud sound of broken glass.

“That was unnecessary!” Winnie said with a hand over her heart.

“Can’t say I’m too happy with what she said either. This is awful.” Grace said.

“I wasn’t expecting this.” was the only thing Clara said.

Morning couldn’t come soon enough. They needed answers. And Tabitha doubted sleep would come. They wanted to know more about whatever events had brought them all together, and the one who had been present in each one, the one who could return after dying.

Who had conversed with a higher being.

Who had gotten everyone out.

Oh yes, they were very curious.

Chapter 4: I ponder of something terrifying

Chapter Summary

The boys get the news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Smitten was not very good at keeping secrets from others. How could he, when his role in rescuing his Princess was only to feel? So, it stood to reason the first thing he did after receiving the strangest phone call of his life, would be to seek out another to tell him about it.

The Princesses had wanted space to discover this new world they had found themselves in, and Smitten could not fault them for that. Being human, having their own bodies, had taken some time getting used to. He did miss his feathers, truth to be told.

So, to receive a call that they wanted to meet up? All of them, not just his beloved? It was akin to the time he saw the sun for the very first time, and that was hard to top.

As it was, he found someone soon enough, walking out of his room.

Hunched posture, larger than most of the others, black hair... yes, that had to be the one their decider referred to as the Voice of the Broken. Given the state of his hair, coming out of a nap.

He grinned. “Buenas tardes!”

Only a few of them had the privilege of knowing more than two of their group at once. That is to say, Smitten had never met Broken in the path in the woods, had even berated their decider over the name he privately used for him - ‘Broken’ seemed like an insult and he was not about to use it- but he wondered the reason for it.

Aside from being down most of the time, he didn’t seem too bad. It would be better with time, Smitten was sure.

Which was why he wasn’t surprised when Broken seemed to deflate when seeing him and turn back around with a, “¿Qué tienen de buenas?”

“I have gotten news that will brighten that grim heart of yours, my friend!” Smitten smiled, not even faltering when Broken did stop walking back. “The ladies called to our dwelling a little while ago. They want us to go over there as soon as we can. All of us, if possible.”

Broken stopped so suddenly Smitten felt worry bubble and pop under his skin. “Not me, surely.”

“Surely, surely!” Smitten parroted back. Why was it so difficult to imagine? Their beloveds had to like all of them, even if they had unique ways of expressing said love.

Instead of answering, Broken changed course straight to the bathroom. Given that he left the door open, Smitten deemed it safe to follow. He would not make that mistake again, so he checked to save himself, and Broken, the embarrassment.

Broken was staring at himself in the mirror, so intensely it seemed to Smitten, for a moment, that his aim was to break it by his gaze alone. No, on closer inspection, he was not staring at himself, but at his beard, which he had been struggling to grow since they had gotten there.

“What troubles you so?” Smitten already knew, but he had been around the others enough to know it could not hurt to ask. “I happen to think that beard looks good on you, don’t try to set it on fire with a look.”

Broken frowned at him, and when Smitten didn’t redirect his attention somewhere else, sighed. “How is She supposed to know it’s me if I don’t look like myself?”

That was something he had not thought about. He went by the Princesses’ house a few times to keep his beloved company, and Stubborn did too in his own way, but if Broken had stayed there... “None of us look like we did before, that’s true, but,” he brightened, trying to get his companion to display at least some cheer, “I’m sure she will know it’s you in some way.”

Broken stroked his beard, his face a picture of ponderment. Progress! He was getting through to him! “She *can* read minds...”

Smitten had prided himself in knowing nothing in his life had taken him off guard so far. This was the moment that pride ended. What did *that* mean?! “...so she will know it’s you!”

“Or by my name.” Broken interrupted, still focused more inwards than outwards.

Smitten pounced on the opportunity to change the subject. “You’ve decided on a name already?”

Broken nodded, and Smitten wondered if what he saw deep in his eyes was a certain amount of pride. “Borja. She will know the meaning. And it starts with ‘B’.”

“I have to think of one soon...” Smitten had too many options at his disposal, but he knew he had to be quick, lest ‘Smee’ become his actual name in the eyes of the others.

He had not minded when it was a mere nickname, but he did take offense now thanks to that movie they had watched a few days ago. Smee was the name of a villain! An **incompetent** villain!

“You know, I’m starting to think...”

“A miracle has taken place.” Smitten might not be the best at reading the room - everyone had their faults - but even he could tell that was not meant for him to hear.

So he did not call it out.

Just as he thought he would, Bro- no, Borja said aloud a different thing. “We are the lucky ones, huh?”

Smitten jolted out of his thoughts. He had never seen the taller man call himself ‘lucky’, or any other kind of positive adjectives. Perhaps his words of encouragement had born fruit! “Whatever do you mean, my friend?”

“Most of the others said their Princesses weren’t good to them,” Borja explained, giving up on his beard so far. “You and I were happy with them, no matter the odds against us.”

Smitten smiled widely. This was unexpected but not unwelcome! He had his doubts whether helping Borja out of the murky depths of despair was possible, but there was his proof that he should not give up! Clearly, time away from the woods had done him good.

“That’s the spirit! All of us were against incredible odds, but we persevered, did what we had to do, got the Princess saved and got our happy ending!”

“Do you really think so?” Borja was looking at him from the mirror. “We did what we had to do?”

“Our companions would tell you the same thing!” he said firmly.

Right, Smitten had to tell the others about this. He went back to the hallway, leaving Borja with his thoughts. At least he had convinced him to go.

From the window, he could see two of the ex Voices making their way back to the house. Smitten peered down; long blond hair, an absolutely magnificent beard, built like a tank- that one was Stubborn, or Gonzalo as he had chosen to be called. Gonchi for friends.

Smitten was very supportive of his quest for self-improvement, but challenging Hunted to a run was not it. Seeing the wardrobe of a man pale, sweaty and with trembling limbs had been something he would have deemed an impossibility a while ago. Hunted had said it was because he forgot to ‘pace himself’ and wanted to do too much, too quickly.

And the other person, lanky, black hair slicked back- oh. Smitten didn’t know what was about Cold... he *hated* him?

It could be how the other Voice was allergic to feelings, it seemed. Smitten could not understand not feeling everything to the fullest. He didn’t do apathy. It just was not in his nature to do anything of the sort. And. Besides. It was very unsettling. Not feeling anything at all.

It might be that his smile was too sharp to be actually kind.

Perhaps it was the way he riled up others on purpose. He had heard him say very unkind things to Ciro and Borja-- and in the latter's he had jumped to his defense because everyone knew Borja would just accept it!

Voices got around. He had heard through the rumor tea mill that attempting to do that to Hunted had been why Cold had been taken to the hospital a month prior. He couldn't say it was not deserved.

Interested, he tried to overhear their conversation.

"The end of curiosity is the first step toward death."

"You're halfway there then!" Gonzalo was saying- his voice was a lot louder now that they were not sharing a body. "You're a first-class sloth!"

"Hospital's orders," Cold replied blandly.

"You healed by the third day and you know it! You just sit around doing nothing of value!"

"So?"

"Being lazy is the worst thing you can be!" a bit over dramatic and self-centered, but Smitten could see his point. They *were* trying to make this work.

"So is being envious. Why are you getting on my case when Connie cheated on his match against you the other day?"

They had already gone inside the house by then, but Smitten could clearly hear an indignant exclamation.

Oh, no. Oh, *no*.

Smitten sprinted, but before he could reach the area where the bedrooms were located, he could hear what followed. Did nobody in this house have the decency to lock doors? Gonzalo was advancing towards Connie, who looked about ready to hide in his scarf if that was an option.

"YOU CHEATED?!" Gonchi was roaring.

"I--"

"You incredibly stupid--"

"W--"

"Completely fucking DENSE--"

"Gon--"

"MIND-ADDLED IDIOT--"

“Well I-“

“FOR A *MATCH?! I COULD’VE KILLED YOU!*”

“No, you couldn’t have.”

“YES I COULD HAVE! CONNIE, *Connie!* WHAT am I going to DO with you?!” Gonzalo grounded out desperately, making to shake his head until something clicked.

Smitten knocked once on the doorframe, announcing his presence. In the next blink, Connie was next to him, relief pouring out of him in waves.

“Smee, I’m so glad you’re here-” Connie smiled, finally letting the lower half of his face out of that plaid pink-and-black scarf. “Tell Gonzalito I won’t do it again, he won’t believe me-”

Smitten gave him a look that made him shrink before putting himself between the two. Before, he wouldn’t even twitch at yet another instance of being called by that nickname, but he was getting tired.

“My friends, we need to meet up in the living room. It’s an emergency.”

“I already voted for banning Skeptic from the kitchen and I won’t change it.” Gonzalo cut him off.

Smitten blinked. Skeptic’s meals were fine, a bit too reliant on garlic, however. “What? No, that is not it. The Princesses invited all of us to their home today.”

“What?” the other two said in unison, before Gonzalo broke his momentary stillness with an overjoyed, “YES!”

Smitten called to his retreating back, “Is it too much to ask for one of you to help spread the news?”

He hoped Gonchi would tell the others downstairs, if they were there. He was so glad when Connie volunteered with nary a fight. They went together to the closest bedroom they could find, the one that belonged to Quiet. The threads that tied them together weren’t really pointing there, but it was good to check.

The room was... surprisingly bare and lonely. Shadows threw themselves over the room as though reaching out in worship, pooling over ragtag sheets, turning them almost gray. No Quiet, no knickknacks, nothing. It was as if sound had gone to die there- as if the world was holding its breath.

“Does he own enough to leave lying around?” Smitten wondered aloud. Did he have to have a talk with his friend about valuing himself?

“It was certainly fuller when I slept here,” Connie said absently.

“*When you what?*” Smitten repeated testily, voice a little high.

“Nightmares,” Connie answered simply. “What I went through with my princesses was... disturbing, the bladed one too. Sometimes he needs a little help in knowing what’s real.”

Going to the hospital had been an issue, the way they asked for papers and proof of identity to someone who had nothing of the sort. They had thought he should be referred to a pediatrician. Quiet did not look like a teenager, did he?

His hand throbbed with every beat of his heart. Hero (or Hiro, or Nando, or whatever he ended up choosing as his name) kept stealing concerned looks at him. Almost touched the threads tying them together, like Quiet couldn't feel the worry regardless. But those things were good. They kept him grounded.

It had been his fault. Most of the time, he would try to brave through the nightmares on his own, but the intensity of them had crept up on him so slowly he could not pinpoint when was the moment realized he could not do it on his own. After a few sleepless nights, he had chosen to go to one of his friends for comfort.

Connie and his masterful ability to distract him from his thoughts, Gonchi who had told him that whatever happened he could call for him, Hero who had been his first choice. The night before, after waking up dreaming, he had thought of going to Cheated. Maybe he had gotten disoriented in the dark or his subconscious had played tricks on him, but he had ended up accidentally knocking on Cold’s door instead.

He knew nothing could faze Cold, but he had looked like he had been expecting him. Perhaps even happy that he had chosen to knock on his door, though that might be wishful thinking. Cold had not asked a single question, had led him back to his room, had laid down with him.

Quiet did not even have time to open his mouth. An awful fog drifted over his thoughts, the face of the man in front of him losing focus in his eyes.

Something he did... something he did to him. Something Quiet had asked him to do, after a nightmare. Something only he could do, his job, really. His memories had started to feel vague, distant.

A few times, he felt sure he remembered something, only then he would begin to think of it, and it was like viewing it through a foggy mirror, a sense of detachment permeating the pictures in his head, and he would feel nothing... nothing about any of it.

The lids of his eyes had felt so heavy. Thoughts formed and broke in his head. Could not focus. Could not hold on to anything. Things stopped making sense after that.

He couldn’t remember what had happened before he fell asleep. He couldn't remember what had happened when he woke. He had been alone. He knew that. He felt like he was frozen from the inside out. He knew that.

The first semi coherent thought had been that he couldn’t stay there any longer. He had managed to pick up some of his stuff and moved them to Hero’s room. Hero spoke to him,

but his voice sounded far away. He could see his mouth moving, but the words were faint, detached. Like they were coming from someone else.

He still tried to function, drifting through that fog, helping with the cooking, when he had cut his hand all along the flesh bridging his thumb and pointer finger, all the way to the tip. With the edge of a can. It cut through the fog, too.

The kitchen had resembled a murder scene (he knew, he had starred in many of those), and Oli had fainted seeing so much blood. Hence, the hospital.

It had been his fault, really.

His hand throbbed. Maybe the doctor who had stitched him up was a pediatrician, he had no idea of what age he looked like. They had fled, yes, but not before the doctor asked a few too many questions. Possibly because he had scar tissue in areas that should have killed him. And they did, for the thousandth time.

He had matching scars with Ciro and that would have been cause for concern alone. A line over his neck, from the Prisoner. A few burns, some from fire, some from acid. A gruesome knotted line cutting him in half. No scans on bones, but he would not be surprised if some had not healed right.

His chest, though he had not shown it, was a mess from when Broken had the blade, and there were starbursts over his heart, courtesy Smitten and Spectre, once upon a never. Had it truly happened if only he could remember it?

Feathers, as it turned out, could hide a lot.

“Is it bad that I’m happy?” Quiet said it so low Hero could have pretended to not hear it. He did that sometimes, redirecting his thoughts using his threads if he wanted others to not hear. It was useful to have private conversations, and to notify Paco and Hunted so they would not be startled if he suddenly entered a room.

Of course, this time he could not be as lucky.

“About what?” Hero turned his head so fast his high ponytail almost smacked him.

Quiet stared at him for a moment, words failing him. Afraid of shaping an idea into existence, of making it real.

“The wound?” Hero prompted, so gently Quiet had to break eye contact. His hand was stitched. Black thread cut through the flesh.

“It’s the first one that’s normal.” The first one not from *Her*.

They had won, in the end, their stance against the Princesses. Or it was more like a tie. Something like that. They were out of the woods, at the very least. And after the win, they had to keep going. Life went on.

Cheated tugged at his hair, willing it to grow faster. It was too short for his tastes and he swore it grew slowly just to annoy him.

He was seated on one of the couches, trying his hardest to make a rubix cube work. Skeptic (had he, in the end, chosen a name? Sherlock? Harry?) was with his nose deep in a book, glasses almost slipping from his face. He would barely be aware of his surroundings unless someone took it away from him. He knew, he had checked.

What was more unusual was Hunted right next to him, also reading. As far as he knew, Hunted did not read, but he had found that particular book and had not been able to put it down.

They clashed, in the beginning. Hunted too scared and instinctive, Cheated trapped in that melody of violence and all too willing to strike before being struck first. He was glad life went on.

“Avellano.”

Ciro blinked, doing his very best to repress a snort. “That’s a tree. Why are you naming yourself after a tree? Why are me and Paquito the only ones with good naming skills?”

“Thanks, Ciro.” the ex Voice of the Paranoid said from the kitchen. Right, that was his name now. He still had to get used to it.

“Call me Hazel, then. It’s not after a tree, it’s after the protagonist of this book- and it would be too much to call myself El-ahrairah.”

Ciro had been about to ask what that one meant, when he saw the way Hunted tensed and his eyes drifted from his book, to the door. Ciro positioned himself to the right of Hunted. Paco was too far away to notice. If he had, he too would move behind them, eyes, as always, hauntingly wide.

(It was a rhythm at that point, one the three of them know by heart.)

“Are we talking about names?” Cold made his appearance known at the same time Hunted stood to leave.

Now, Ciro could not blame him, he would follow as soon as he could get away from this tricky thing called ‘social interaction’. “Finally decided on one?” he asked, because there was no way he could get away with calling himself ‘Cold’.

“Atanasio.” Cold said with such confidence one could have been forgiven for thinking it was his actual name.

Laughter burst out of him. Was he serious? “What the fuck? That doesn’t sound remotely from here. Pick something else.”

“I don’t see anyone getting on Hero’s case over his name, hey Cold,” Skeptic interrupted from his book. “Nor mine. How does ‘Harry’ sound like?”

“Hey, Skeptic.”

“Hero will pick one eventually and you really shouldn’t pick literature names,” Ciro went to tug at his hair in exasperation before he remembered it was too short for that. “At least read books in the local language.”

“Ambrosio.”

And with that it was obvious all criticism Ciro could make would not be acknowledged. “Same bullshit as the last one, seriously?”

“Caín.”

“That sounds like you’d kill us at the first opportunity...” Cheated’s - Ciro’s, gods, he would have to get used to that - grin slipped out of his face when he realized Cold’s expression did not indicate he was joking. He grappled with the implication like one would a bar of soap.

He had the urge to back up without taking his eyes off him-- that was Hunted’s influence, he was sure. Instead, Ciro went straight to the kitchen, where Paco was- why did it look like Paco trying to hide the fact he committed a murder?

“Paquito, I’ll sleep with a fork under my pillow tonight,” he said as a way of greeting. “Got any you haven’t used?”

Paco offered him a kitchen knife without looking up from the ones he was washing. “A knife’s better. Take mine. I’ll grab another.”

Ciro opened his mouth to say he preferred to keep away from knives for the time being, then the last two sentences registered. “...you sleep with a knife under your pillow.”

Paco looked at him like he didn’t know how the world worked. “Yes? The question is, why don’t any of you?”

“I’ve had enough of blades for a lifetime. Make it several lifetimes.”

“I didn’t do this,” Paco grouched, eyes even more striking from the depths of his eye bags. “Quiet cut himself and hand wounds bleed a lot.”

“Don’t I know it,” Ciro sighed, before he perked up. “Che Paco- Paquito- you know pretty much everything that goes on here, no?”

The ex-Paranoid kept washing a cup. “Somehow the others think that giving me information is going to make me want to keep making tea for everyone... so yes.”

Ciro leaned in. “So, are you going to tell me what did Frosty do to make Hunted- sorry, Ave, of all people fuck him up?”

“Whatever it was, to make Hunted wail on him must have been pretty bad-” Paco stuttered once he saw Cold, Caín, whatever his name was on his way upstairs, and switched. Not their fault the other Voice was too disinterested to learn. “Pero sí sé porqué lo tuvieron que

hospitalizar,” he leaned in as well and lowered his voice. “Parece que tenía el escroto desgarrado.”

Ciro’s hand spasmed as a cold sweat started forming on his forehead. “La puta madre que la re parió... ¿literalmente le rompió las bolas?” Before that Connie-like feeling of mischief left him, he raised his voice, “Ave, por favor, casate conmigo.”

He was rewarded by a wheezy laugh from somewhere in the house, “I’d rather not!”

Ciro blinked as Paco tried to drown his own laughter with the sound of washing. “You didn’t have to answer that fast!”

Gonchi saved him from making even more of a fool of himself. He soon wished he hadn’t.

The one who was an Opportunist in all but name did not want to answer the knock on his door, but did it anyway because it was a rare enough occurrence. He was not moving from his bed, they could talk with the door between them.

“I just sat down to read this book, it’s fantastic. What?”

‘Fantastic’ was subjective, sure, but it was fantastic to him.

“Hi Oli. You’re reading a duology and you’re at a part where they use butter as lube, it’s bound to be as well written as it is sanitary.”

“What the *fuck*, where are you?!” the ex-Opportunist whirled around, trying to spot him, how else would he be able to read over his shoulder? “And the dialogue and setting are very realistic, thank you very much.” Not much else was, but that was not the point.

“Of course, that’s why you’re reading it: the plot. And how true to life it is, huh?” Connie’s snort was blocked by the sound of Oleander shuffling around his room to try to find him. He felt spiteful enough to check the trash can.

“It’s some sort of handwritten sci-fi novel.”

“‘Some sort’, don’t give me that, we both know you read all of it, Oli.”

“You WROTE all of it! What, my friend writes a full book coming up with ways to use feathers I never, and I mean *never* would have thought of and I am supposed to not read it? I had to hide it so many times. How did you know so many of those terms?”

“You know, you could have asked me before you took it. Did I really write it if no one will ever believe you?”

“Yes, and they will know the truth of my words once they realize it’s written how you speak. Listen, stop pausing the sex scenes to go over whatever other characters are doing, it really takes the reader out of the mood,” Oleander sighed and stood up from looking under the bed.

“*While waiting for the butter to cool, or all things, Vicente started—*”

The scream Oleander let out was almost high enough to break glass. “ *Honestly where the fuck are you* and how can you see what I’m reading.”

“It’s a secret!”

“¡Secreto en reunión es mala educación!” Oleander wanted to slam his head into the table.

“Okay, what do you want?”

There was silence behind the door that did not make him feel good. Very much the opposite. Oh no.

“Whatever it is, it’s not good, huh?”

“Not really at all, but there is an interesting ending. And well, it isn’t actually over yet, more like the continuation of someth—” the rambles were starting up.

Anything that could make Contrarian go quiet like that was cause for worry. There was a pecking order, sure, but even he had to admit Connie could be useful for easing the mood.

“This isn’t about her, is it?”

“Got it right in one. Smee got a very weird call a while ago and we are trying to get everyone here before we do anything. Just get down there fast before Quiet does or Gonzalo explodes. Whichever comes first. Probably the explosion. Paco is stress-baking so many cookies.”

“What kind?”

“Snowball with caramel bits.”

Oli ran out of the room so fast he almost tripped.

“Going to the house of the people that killed us over and over? Pero ‘tamos todos locos, no!” Paco made his stance very clear, half-perched on his seat. There were two chairs unoccupied.

“I agree,” Avellano nodded, “Going where they have the advantage, knowing even one of them would be enough to kill us? That’s suicide.”

Smitten sighed, “I don’t know what most of you went through, but the Princess- the Rival, to be more specific, told me she would not let any harm come to us. She would not lie about that!”

“I’m not even sure she can lie. She was very direct with me...” Gonchi added. None of them had to ask him for his opinion, he was practically vibrating.

“They want to see us, we need to see them,” was all Borja had to say in the matter, slouched as he was. There was a fanatical glint in his eyes that made some of the others pause, unused to such a vibrant display from the normally dour Voice. “I’ve waited for permission all this time. It would have been rude,” and then he leveled a glare at Smitten and Stubborn, “To barge in without an invitation.”

"There's no need for permission!"

"Sure, let's all go back to the ones that killed us over and over! That's how you sound like! Real compelling stuff!" Ciro glowered, and would have advanced towards Borja if Smitten had not prevented him.

"They're all expecting us to go, so we can just... not go." Connie shrugged. "Imagine their faces if we don't show up. It's not like they know where we live, do they?"

"It's bound to be interesting. What could they want from us? You have left me very curious," Caín was lounging in his chair like one would a throne.

"I'm with him," Oli said, which, big surprise, "They called all of us for something, they need us for something. If anything, that's leverage we can use."

"I can't speak for anyone's experiences, but I don't think it would hurt to try. Worst case scenario, we escape." Skeptic said. "There's something weird with this, and I want to find out what."

"I don't want to die again, why's that so hard to understand?!"

"We should give them a chance!"

"Why should we?!"

"Because maybe they want to make amends, ever thought of that?!"

"It's a trick, I tell you!"

A cacophony of noise, the likes of which Ciro had already expected, based on past experiences. Nobody listening to anyone, wanting to make their voice heard. How had they resolved that last one, again? It was not something he knew how to do without relying on-

A very loud clap reverberated in the room, at the same time their threads *vibrated*, instantly silencing everyone. Oh, Ciro had hoped it wouldn't come to this, that the one with self preservation instincts would win and nobody would have to mention it to Quiet. He did not deserve to be dragged back to whatever the Princesses wanted with them. He had not discussed it with Ciro yet, but he could draw some conclusions based on the scars.

Ten pairs of eyes turned to the door. Quiet was there, having clapped to silence them, as he had learned to do in lieu of making them forcibly shut up. Cheated winced when he saw the stitches- that must *hurt*. Hero had taken his seat at some point with no one noticing.

"What's going on?"

Broken - Borja
Stubborn - Gonzalo, Gonchi, Gonzalito
Cold - Caín
Contrarian - Connie
Hunted - Avellano, Ave
Opportunist - Oleander, Oli
Paranoid - Paco, Paquito
Cheated - Ciro

Buenas tardes - Good afternoon
¿Qué tienen de buenas? - What's so good about it (the afternoon)
I'll leave what Paranoid said about Cold's hospitalization untranslated, it's funnier that way for you guys to look it up
Ave, por favor, casate conmigo - Ave, please, marry me (joking)
'Secreto en reunión es mala educación' - an idiom, keeping secrets in a meeting is rude.
Usually answered back with 'secreto en infancia no tiene importancia' - 'Secrets when you're a child don't count as such'

Please comment, it makes inspiration grow faster!

Chapter 5: You are out of my mind

Chapter Summary

Debates and debates and debates. And flowers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The day had started bad enough.

He had known something was wrong with their decider from the moment he looked at him. There had been a hollowness to his eyes, a death. Less like it was Quiet and more like a marionette; a stiff facsimile of a person tugged along by forces he could not hope to understand. Hero had tugged on his threads and Quiet didn't tug back.

He'd gone through the motions of life like a performance. Hero did not need the wound to see it. All he could do was hope that the day was a good one, but of course luck decided to spite him.

Hero had been hoping that the reappearance of Quiet would have restored things to something resembling order, but soon found out it was a pipe dream. What thing could surge from the question other than another cacophony?

"We were-" Cold started, and Ciro struck.

"Don't mind Frosty, we can solve disagreements without you two, you know?" Ciro smiled, clapping a hand over Cold's mouth and shaking him a little at that last part, a dangerous warning bite to his joking tone that even Hero could pick up on that said 'shut up or I will kill you.' His tense posture was not doing him any favors. "There's really nothing to worry about!" Ciro jumped back from Cold as if he was burned. "You *bit* me?!"

"You wouldn't let go," Cold shrugged, and Hero honestly did not know what was wrong with the others that they would just sidestep it neatly. "Never call me that again."

"The Princesses invited us to their residence today, we were discussing whether or not we should," Skeptic cut in.

Hero didn't process the words at first, he was more focused on the fact that Quiet had gone very, very still.

"That-" Ciro spluttered, starting over and over again, "That- you *just*- as- without even-?! How was-?! You *can't*-!"

“Take a breath and use your words.”

Use his words he did, as usual. “What the FUCK? La concha de la lora, how fucking stupid do you have to be? What part of that sounds like ‘nothing to worry about’?! I’ll tell you what there is to be fucking sorry about. The princess inviting you over so she can find some way to chop you up until you’re a pile of meat ribbons!”

“She won’t-” Gonchi rolled his eyes. “Ciro just said that like it was a given! But he doesn’t know! Don’t think about it, that’s worked for us before!”

“Why are you trying to convince him? I know I’m going regardless.” Cold said.

Paco turned to him slowly. “Are you saying we split up- Are you out of your *mind*?!”

Hero knew he couldn't draw much attention. That's what his threads were for.

(worry) Still with me?

(anxiety) (weightlessness) Yes.

That was the reply. It was faint, and Quiet was shrinking back in a way that he shouldn’t be. Something in his eyes seemed to be almost phasing out, backing away. “No. No way we’re going.”

His tone was final, decisive. It was not met with silence.

“Boss, we put it to a vote-” Oli started to rise from his seat.

“You don’t count,” Quiet countered, voice still not quite normal but dear god did it try to be.

Cold rose from his seat. “This is going nowhere. I’m going. If you want to go, I’ll be at the door in half an hour.”

He did not pause his strides out of the room as the other occupants in it made even more noise. Hero didn’t even hear the doors closing. His ears were ringing.

“-ight, you’re not the one making the decisions anymore...” Oli was saying, straightening up in his seat to his full height.

“So what, you can just override me now?!” and there it was, a sudden burst of energy.

“They want us to see them, clearly they still have affection for us,” Smitten started, before glancing at Ciro, whose disfigured visage gazed right back with barely concealed fury, “...deep down.”

The smile that graced Quiet’s lips was not a nice one. “You’re insane, Smitten. You’ll make the others crazy too.”

For a moment, nobody moved, wanting to see who would make the next move.

"Smee wouldn't be so in love with anything that was inherently harmful. He just *wouldn't*," Skeptic rose his hands up in defense, tone conciliatory.

"Yes, he would," Quiet argued, with a bite in his voice, "It's in his nature. He loves without restraint or care."

Quiet's statement made everyone go silent. Ciro and Connie glanced at each other.

"They want us there, they want our company," Broken, of all people, spoke up. "We did what we had to do before. You know what's insane, decider, to keep going like thi--"

"Borja." Quiet's voice cut down like a knife, and Hero wondered how and when did Quiet know the Voice's new name.

Broken hesitated and looked away. A second later, he looked back up. "If we keep at this, they won't want to be around us anymore. And that will be worse. What if they need us? You're not thinking."

"**Borja**," was the only thing Quiet said, louder. "You don't need her approval anyway, you know you're better than this."

"Let's look at the fact we have now," Skeptic said, and irritation made its presence known in Hero's chest. Being a mediator was his job, what was he doing? "Gonchi and Smitten have gone to see their girls a few times and nothing has happened to them. Why wouldn't I want to see the missus?"

It was like a skip in animation. One moment, Quiet was looking at Skeptic, hearing him talk, watching him push his glasses back, the next he had turned his whole body around in the opposite direction, grabbing the armrest as if about to stand. "Did he now?"

Hero placed his hand on Quiet's shoulder at the same time Smitten sat ramrod straight, confusion clear as day on his face. Why would he be angry with Smitten, of all people? Wasn't it obvious in hindsight that he would do his own thing, especially concerning the Princess? Maybe he should have talked about it with Quiet, but now he had to prevent him from lunging.

Skeptic took a breath. "Sorry, with all due respect..."

Quiet almost hissed out the words. "With all due respect you shut up and **listen to me!**"

Hero retracted his hand. And there was silence, so sudden it pressed in the ears. And there were the others shutting up, standing to attention, because they were their own people but there had been a sort of hierarchy, once.

"I remember more than all of you," Quiet finally said, leaning back down. "And if any of you were to go where they are, alone... it could hurt. More than anything in the world. You could hurt each other, too."

Quiet was a wholly different creature with the dark devotedly passing around him. Gold slashed down his neck by the turned on lights, making sunbeams out of it. The dark

swallowed the light in up his face, every feature pointing towards Hero. He looked at Hero like he was the only thing in the world.

“Look, I know I’m not the one who makes the decisions anymore,” he started softly. “And my word doesn’t count for much, and you can make your own choices-“

Hero did not take his eyes off of him, disturbed. He could feel it, the change.

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” Quiet spoke slowly, as if trying to drive the meaning in. The whole room seemed to hold their breath, as if held in time by Quiet’s gravity.

Hero looked back into his eyes, matching his seriousness. He looked older all at once, a sliver of what the other voices suspected went through showing for a moment. “I want you to swear to me what you’re telling me is true.”

Quiet did not hesitate even a moment. “I swear it’s true.”

Hero felt concern swelling in his heart. So he had been right. He accepted it as fact without another thought. Something about it broke the spell, made time pass again. “Then I believe you.”

“What... just happened?” Oli was frowning, hesitant all of a sudden.

"What?" Quiet frowned in turn.

“Did you do something?” Paco interjected.

Quiet turned his head towards him, no longer a powerful presence but a merely confused one. “...No?”

Ciro was already shaking his head. “You did, something happened just now-“

Gonchi chuckled, shaking his head.

“I don’t know what that was, but it did feel nice,” Connie put his arms up as if to surrender. Hero looked around at all of them, confused.

“Look, you just saw it happen- did Quiet’s eyes glow, or made something appear out of thin air? No. It was just a conversation. What’s wrong with you all?”

“Oh, you felt it,” Ave said lowly, the merest trace of a smile on his lips.

Skeptic panted, regretting his choice of leaving with a heavy backpack, of all things. Maybe it would be worth it in the end, but right now the weight of it was making him reconsider.

It had to rain soon, that level of heat at that time of the year foretold nothing but storms in the horizon. But right then, it was a nice day, the sun trying to turn them into shrimps notwithstanding. Not a cloud in the sky, birds flying, insects buzzing around. Far behind them, houses that indicated the beginning of the slow trickle of population towards a city.

It was logical nobody had wanted to settle too close to people until they mastered the art of actually being people. And they still weren't too good at it, Skeptic would know.

"So, where is the house, Smee? I don't think you told us," Oleander said, already starting to sweat in his short sleeved shirt. Which served him right, he had insisted on going where the sun hit, and now they were all paying the price.

"Follow your heart, my friend, and you'll arrive without me having to say anything," Smitten proclaimed.

"...what?"

Skeptic glanced longingly at the cluster of trees that he could see on the other side of the road. Cold apparently got both the same idea and was bored of having the sun pelting his back and crossed the road, narrowly avoiding getting hit and nearly giving Skeptic a heart attack.

"Guys-" Borja started to chime in, thwarting Skeptic's attempt to walk under his shadow so the sun wouldn't hit him.

Stubborn snorted out a laugh. "We'll find it eventually, come on."

Maybe he could stand a few more minutes under the sun, yes. If only because he did not want to die like that.

"We're going the right way, yes?" he heard Borja ask Smitten, "You were joking about following your heart?"

Smitten's face was very serious indeed for half a second, before it broke into a grin. "I was, yes. Don't call me 'Smee' and we won't have any problems."

A sharp whistle absolutely pierced his ears. Snapping his head up, he saw Caín removing his fingers from his mouth after whistling one more time for good measure. But that was not what got his attention. It was the two women that were with him. One pale haired, one a dirty blonde, and Skeptic knew who the last one was.

...How? Did he have a princess-homing-device?

One good thing about crossing the street as a group: either all of them would die, or all of them would make it to the other side. Luckily for him, the latter ended up happening. Smitten was already being hugged within an inch of his life by the petite Princess- that looked on the edge of painful, honestly. The shopping bags the two had been carrying were forgotten.

"...Dashing, I presume?" Skeptic's once-upon-a-time missus asked, looking for all in the world like she would hurl the shopping bag on Smitten's head. He internally recoiled when he looked at her in the eyes.

Smitten extricate himself from the hug, stars practically shining in his eyes, "Is that referring to me?"

The fair-haired one looked away, “Tabi, please, I call him that *once*...”

Tabi. Short for Tabitha? Skeptic committed that to memory immediately. He lowered his bag, but before he could say anything Oleander put himself in front of him.

“Are you the Princesses?” Now, Skeptic could only see the back of his brown hair, but he could imagine the kind of smile he was making. Or trying to make. “Name’s Oleander, Oli for short. The one who found you is Cain,” the man inclined his head, “You already knew Smee,” Smitten did an actual twitch at that, “This one is Skeptic, still doesn’t have a name,” he would have to think up a name and soon, “This one is Borja,” Oli tried to give the tallest member of their group a pat on the shoulder, but couldn’t quite manage it. “And-”

“I can introduce myself, Oli. Gonzalo, I’m Ava’s...” the blond trailed off, clearly looking for a word that encompassed what he felt.

“Beloved?” Smitten suggested.

“No,” Gonchi cut that in the root. “...I’m Ava’s.” he finished simply. “You invited all of us?”

“I’m Damiana, and this is Tabitha,” the one with fair hair finally introduced them.

Tabitha was scanning them, “I thought we extended the invitation to everyone. Was Ava not clear?”

“Some of us couldn’t appreciate the opportunity you gave us,” Oli cut in smoothly. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m a guy who likes to keep his options open, but I really want to know what I’m dealing with here-”

“Not until everyone’s here. It’s important.”

“They’re not-” Oli insisted.

“We’ll wait for them.” Tabitha interrupted. “We aren’t ready yet, anyway. We brought stuff to eat for when you get there- you guys do like chocolate?”

Among the sea of nods, Borja rose up, “Does She remember me?”

Tabitha hesitated, fiddling with her bag and looked at him in all his tall not-glory. A smile threatened to take over her features all of a sudden, “Are you the one Thelka says was a ‘little bird’?”

Now that Skeptic thought about it, Borja could be really intimidating if he rose up to full height like he was doing now.

Gonzalo finally seemed to have reached the end of his patience, “I’ll go back and get the others-”

“Wait!” Skeptic jumped up, “They already didn’t listen to us before, you should take someone to make a difference! ...Damiana, maybe? I’m sure they’ll answer better to her than to me.”

Smitten bristled, "Excuse me?!"

"Logically, Damiana seems like the most harmless of the two, and Gonchi is the one with the longest legs, they'll be here quicker," Skeptic blinked, "Sorry, forgot myself. Damiana, would you like to..?"

"Yes!" Damiana blurted out, a huge grin on her face, quite possibly not even noticing Smitten's bewildered expression. Tabitha took the bag she had been carrying with nary a word, and the others settled against the shadows of the trees as both man and woman turned back, one practically skipping.

"I could have gone with her," Smitten grumbled, mind still stuck in the 'processing' stage. He relied a bit too much on his feelings, in Skeptic's opinion.

Skeptic wasted no time in pushing his bag into Tabitha's arms, "I thought you'd like these. Detective and crime novels, I don't know if you have read them but.. I couldn't put them down."

The woman blinked as she examined the contents of the faded green bag, a small smile making its way on her face. "I'm not familiar with most of these- why are there so many books? Your back!"

"I'll be fine," Skeptic smiled, tucking a hair behind his ear. It was really hot, even in the shade.

"Are you okay?" Borja interrupted.

Skeptic cursed him internally when he made her smile disappear. That was before she started talking, "Do you know where two women could get someplace to live alone? There's been some comments from the other girls... I don't feel safe, and then there's the disappearances..."

Smitten's head snapped up, eyes full of concern.

"Disappearances?" Caín leaned in from where he was almost laying down on the grass, eyes almost shining with interest. "Do tell me more."

Skeptic nodded. He had heard something about it. "Something about it being too many people for being an exodus of runaways."

Tabitha smiled. "What else have you found out?"

He leaned in anticipation. "What is there to find?"

"That depends on what you're looking for."

"I'm looking for the truth," and wasn't that the point, always?

"Good. So am I."

Paco and Quiet looked like two peas in a pod, a few nervous mannerisms imitated between themselves subconsciously. It had been bad enough than more than half their flock had decided to take flight, but the waiting was almost the worst part.

Connie had been squeezing his scarf so many times by now, Hero was surprised it was still in one piece. “They will be fine, rage-boy can get them out of anything.”

“What if it’s not the Princesses?” Hero couldn’t help but ask, “What if it’s the Shifting Mound, somehow?”

“¡Salud!” Connie said at once. He couldn’t help but treat her mention like a sneeze, a small blaspheme in return for every time she was made a deity. “I doubt it. We left with her heart, she shouldn’t be able to do anything.”

“When this goes sideways, it’s on you!” Quiet called out to them from the other side of the room. Connie winced just a bit.

“I might’ve told Quiet that he has to have more than stagnation and a bit of change in him. Narrator, being himself, probably omitted what else he controls so Quiet *can’t* control it.”

Hero raised his eyebrows. “...Why are you telling me this?”

Connie gestured to where Quiet and the others were. “Look at him, he’s experimenting. I’m so proud!”

Hero stared. As he watched, Quiet just... Hero didn’t know. Well, he knew- it was power, obviously, but it... it was *his*. Quiet’s power.

He raised his hands up to his mouth in a cupped motion, as though to breathe fire into them, and instead he breathed life. There was no shot of light, no song, nothing to show anything had happened at all. But when he opened his hands, something lived in his palm- the strangest flower he had ever seen. White petals and purple filaments drawing attention to the crownlike green-and-purple structure rising from its center.

And Quiet kept talking, like it was nothing. Like nothing had happened, like he put no thought in the little miracle he’d just performed, tucking it gently behind a laughing Ciro’s ear and effectively blessing him. He looked like more every moment he carried his little gift, the colors agreeing with his skin tone, turning him softer and brighter all at once.

Hero knew, on some level, that Quiet was meant to be a god, but he had never truly processed it. Perhaps Connie had understood, but they never talked about that. Quiet had been one, the Heart had told him he was one, but was he still one?

To him, Gods were people with power who held themselves above others, who had such different minds from mortals it was no wonder the Shifting Mound couldn’t understand them. Both her and the Tower had used their divinity to subjugate, and there was Quiet, making life out of thin air.

And then he did it again, just because Paco was eyeing the flower with a little too much interest. That time Hero didn't watch his hands, too distracted by the glow that bloomed in Quiet's eyes as he breathed out the impossible.

"Anyone would think you're trying to poison me," Paco said, without the nervous energy that permeated him in the construct.

"If you don't want it-"

"I never said that."

Suddenly, Hero understood. That was where the glow went- the silent choir, the glorious light, all that typical miracle stuff they had seen when they encountered the Tower, so different from hers all the same. It didn't come from the flower, and it didn't go with it either. It was in Quiet's eyes. In Quiet.

The doorbell ringing shook him out of his thoughts. Shook the others too.

Most of the others would be the kind of person to answer the door knife in hand, especially after the revelations of the day, so that's why he went. His body felt heavy and he wanted to just stay still somewhere, but not yet. Hero wasn't a fan of stagnation, after so long in a timeless patchwork where nothing changed but the princesses and the number of voices that pressed close to him. It had been exhausting, *was* still exhausting.

But it was better than being in the construct.

He looked out of the window before he opened the door. Honestly, they could have waited a little to go. The asphalt was melting. He could vaguely make out, in the distance, what had to be a shoe which had gotten stuck in the muck, abandoned there.

That Gonchi had only one shoe on was something Hero was not about to acknowledge. He was more distracted by the fact he had not come alone.

There was Gonchi, sweating, and standing close as if hoping to catch him if he went under, was someone Hero knew.

She looked different from what he remembered. Gone was the frilly dress, replaced by a flower-patterned one much more befitting the weather, the hair done in a low ponytail, face red from effort. Those eyes were difficult to forget. Shiny and glittering with something that seared at him. Those eyes that were so familiar.

He thought about Smitten and Borja and how meeting their Princesses would not be necessarily good. He thought about Ciro, Paco, Ave, who had to endure so much alongside him. He thought about Quiet, who had so many scars Hero could not remember him getting and that was *not right*, he had been there through it all, what else had been done to him-

And something tore itself free of his throat. A quivering, startled, visceral hiss that shook his form as he met those eyes.

She startled, half-hiding behind Gonzalo. "I'm sorry..?"

“Nando,” he didn’t know if deciding on a name under pressure made it count, but what was done was done.

There was something tight in his chest. There was movement behind him. They were safer together. Even if nothing was hunting them.

Ave arrived first, rushing beside him, then Quiet, then Ciro asking what was going on, finally Paco, dual-wielding kitchen knives.

Ave took one look at the woman making herself smaller, and Hero could see his tension draining away, being replaced by confusion and no less strong wariness.

Hero- no, *Nando* did not quite know how they had gotten back in, with Gochi downing an entire water bottle and Quiet trying to calm Paco down. His emotions had gotten the best of him again. He couldn’t blame him. He, too, was drowning in the implications.

Quiet was talking, but it didn’t register above the unearthly laughter that was coming from Paco’s mouth. He couldn’t stand it, but Quiet was doing a good job, his arm around Paco’s back, grounding him and keeping him there, and he couldn’t stop shaking. Apparently, he was just telling Paco to breathe.

Breathing. He could do that too. He was doing that. Just a bit too fast, and maybe that was a problem. He tried to take a deeper breath, but it felt like he had to fight his own body for it.

“Easy. It’s okay. Breathe. She’s not going to hurt you. I won’t let her.”

A sort of wheeze escaped Paco’s mouth, a laugh that didn’t have air to sustain itself. Nando tried breathing instead, as Quiet suggested. In and out. It lessened the tightness in his chest.

Eventually, Quiet seemed to be satisfied. “Are you with us again?”

“I never left..?” Paco was saying, eyes slightly glassy. Eventually, the tension plaguing his entire form evaporated, leaving him as limp as a ragdoll. The emotions spilling over every edge of him were slowing down.

It had been a common occurrence in their first days in the world, so many colors and textures they had not been able to name, all overwhelming. It had been a while since Paco had such a debilitating attack.

Soon, Paco’s breathing evened out in a way that suggested he had fallen asleep out of sheer exhaustion. Bodies did that. They gave up on you. Nando wanted to do something similar. He did not think he had the energy to talk for a while.

The Princess was sitting on one of the chairs, wringing her hands together. Her dark eyes were wide. “I’m so sorry,” she said in a whisper. “I didn’t mean to scare him. And- are you okay?”

Ciro had been sitting nearby, squinting at her as if trying to catch her in the act. He startled very slightly when he was directly addressed. “Are you talking to me?”

“Yes!” she gestured broadly at the scars that curved in each arm, scissoring over each other, “You can’t be hurt like that and be okay!”

“I’m as okay as I can be.” Ciro was looking at her up and down, at her skin. Nando understood.

Somehow, irrationally, seeing that there were no marks on her skin was a relief. Not that an innocent person had been hurt – but that the person *was* innocent. Some of the Princesses left marks like that when they wanted to threaten and antagonize, and some just because, and that meant the Damsel hadn’t interacted with people like Razor a lot. It wasn’t much, but it was something. “What do you want with us?”

The Damsel blinked, “Um- you’re supposed to be there. At our house. All of you. Because it wouldn’t be fair if none of you got to see.”

“Got to see what?”

She shook her head. “When I think about it- it’s so weird!” she made a face, concentrating hard. Looking for the right words.

“That’s fine, keep your secrets,” Connie said, looking far more at ease than any of the others.

“I gotta admit, you’re good. This ‘sweet, inn-o-cent Princess’ act,” Ciro said almost to himself.

“It’s not an act,” Quiet spoke, very faintly, “She’s being genuine. You do know how to spot liars, Ciro.”

“She might be telling the truth, but how do we know the others won’t kill us as soon as they have the chance?” Ciro raised his eyebrows, fingers tapping the wooden table lightly.

“We made a vote, all of us,” the Damsel said, skin still shiny from sweat, and it was almost jarring to see that she was not picture-perfect anymore. “They’re not going to hurt you.”

“Can we trust you?” Ciro fired back, with such an intonation Nando was sure, at first, that it had been the sleeping Paco who had spoken.

“If anything happens, I’ll protect you,” Gonchi said, voice almost back to normal.

“So can I!” Ciro turned to him at once, and oh, did that touch a nerve..? “What guarantee do we have that it won’t be like before?”

“Like any of us are good enough liars to pull that off,” Damsel interrupted. She shrugged her shoulders, “Razor can’t lie to save her life and Winnie telegraphs everything. Don’t tell her I said that.”

“She’s not lying,” now, Nando was terrible at spotting liars, but when both Ave and Quiet said that, he would have felt inclined to believe them even if he had not lived through meeting the Damsel.

“They don’t need to be good at lying if they can just flatten us.”

“My Princess said she would protect us, she would not lie about that,” Gonchi insisted, standing up from his chair and swaying only slightly, “Not to me.”

“Safety in numbers. If the whole flock’s there, we have more of a chance to escape than we ever did before,” Ave chimed in. “Half of them are there already. I don’t know most of the Princesses, but at least one of us does.”

Ciro looked half furious. At the Damsel, at himself, Nando didn’t know. “¿Y cuántos se van a morir antes de que escapemos?”

“Ciro,” Nando snapped. Finally, he could talk again.

“No se va a morir nadie, Ciro,” Quiet whispered. “Te lo prometo.”

Even after spending so long in his head, looking through those very same eyes, Nando could not quite read him. An expression like that could’ve been frightening, if he didn’t trust this man... this god?... this being like he did. He believed him, when he said the Princesses could make them hurt more than anything.

They had been through so much together, after all.

And he believed in that power of his, too. The threads, the flowers, who knows what else could he do.

“No, nobody’s dying!” the Damsel insisted, and Nando’s stomach made an unpleasant lurch when he realized she had understood them. “I don’t know why that happened in the first place, or why this is happening now, but I want to know. Also- there’s a lot of things we have to talk about. And apologize for. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

She sighed so hugely it was a wonder her lungs could contain that much air, “But,” and then she looked at the exhausted Paco, at Quiet and Ciro’s scars, “I’ll leave it up to you. I can’t make you go.”

The Princesses were not liars. Whatever they were, obscuring the truth like the Narrator did was simply not in their nature.

Besides, “You can’t let the others go alone, can you?” Nando asked, in barely a whisper. The others were already there, and despite the fact they did not get along too well most times, it didn’t mean he wished them to die.

Quiet shook his head slightly, put his face in his hands, and Nando heard his voice in his ear despite the fact he was nowhere near enough for that. “Of course I can’t.”

Y cuantos se van a morir antes de que escapemos?- And how many would die before we made our escape?

No se va a morir nadie. Te lo prometo - Nobody's dying. I promise you that.

Broken - Borja

Stubborn - Gonzalo, Gonchi, Gonzalito

Cold - Caín

Contrarian - Connie

Hunted - Avellano, Ave

Opportunist - Oleander, Oli

Paranoid - Paco, Paquito

Cheated - Ciro

Hero - Fernando, Nando

Chapter 6: Here we are again pretending

Chapter Summary

Ave is not having a good time, Hero discovers what being ashamed feels like, and Connie is just along for the ride.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I see how it is. You wait until I’m out of commission and make the decision without me!” Paco could not believe this had happened.

“You were asleep!” Gonchi said.

“Why have the vote at all then?!” that was another thing that was grinding his gears. All that preparation and for what?!

“I didn’t think they would actually do it,” Ciro momentarily stopped drinking from the metal-like straw, the *bombilla*, from the *mate* he had insisted on making before they set off. On one hand, a leather cup with yerba and water. On his other hand, he had a thermos, full to the brim of almost boiling water.

If they were friendly, Ciro had said, he could just share the drink. If it was a trap, boiling water to the face would be a good distraction. Paco couldn’t say it was a bad idea. It was long-range, automatically better than a knife.

Not by much, considering they were walking towards, among others, the one that had made him stop working. Would his chant still work? And if it did, only on himself or on the others? The only reason Paco was there: they would drop like flies without him.

Ave would be the first to go down, of that he was sure.

“Why would we not?!” Smitten’s voice rang in his ears. It put his teeth on edge. Why did he insist in revealing their location to at least the entire block, he did not know.

He was not in peak condition, body heavy and mind buzzing still, so he had not said much when they finally rejoined the lovesick one’s group. There were raised eyebrows about the flowers they wore on their chests or the ears, but Paco chose to think of them like a badge of honor, for the voices that actually had *common sense*.

The other Princess didn’t seem to have Damiana’s sheer naivete. A good thing if she was on their side, but Paco was not fooled. They might have been friendlier than the average Princess he had the dubious pleasure to meet, but that just meant they were not to be trusted.

The only other Princess he knew, aside from the doll-like one, was the bladed one. Neither of them filled them with confidence. Despite his decider's words, Paco couldn't help but be on edge. Quiet had said he would not let them be hurt, but intentions mattered little in the face of something that could make them just stop. Ave would be the first to go down. Ciro too, his sense of unfairness overriding common sense.

His hearing sharpened. It was difficult with the way Ciro kept drinking, but his heartbeat was very quick. Paco had to strain his hearing against the watery rattle of sucking up a beverage Ciro no longer had - time for a refill, it seemed.

Lungs shaky, but functioning well.

His liver and digestive system... well Ciro might be trying to give himself blisters with the way he kept drinking that hot infusion, but nothing life-threatening.

Nerves... Left hand shaky, possible nerve damage, but he had been like that since the beginning.

Ave next. Heart was functioning extremely quickly. Too loud.

Lungs were working overtime, it took effort to draw a deep breath, possibly because of the heat.

Liver and digestive system- Paco's cookies weren't life threatening.

Nerves, good, too responsive, even.

His heart was too loud. Something was wrong.

Paco found himself placing a hand on Ave's back. There, under his shirt. Gauze?

Ave moved away. Immediately. Before Paco could even try to press down. Was he hurt and had not told anyone? In this situation? With the way Ave weaved his way to the middle of the group, he was willing to bet on it.

There was a movement in his peripheral, a blackness. How was the decider even more scared that even Ave was beyond him. But he was, he could feel it in his threads. His hand was still bandaged. Useless.

(worry) (exasperation) Decider, call it off. Something's not adding up.

(resignation) I can't do that. They chose that on their own. I can't let them get hurt either way.

That was a flaw if Paco ever saw one. Caring too much, especially if the others were assholes. Even extending that to Princesses who were more normal-looking.

"They want to use us," Paco went back to speaking aloud, tilted his head at the two girls leading the group, carrying a grocery bag each, "I don't know for what, but they do. That's how this *works*."

“Believe me, I believe you. I was with you, remember?” Quiet said, eyes roaming over each of the Voices. Hero was almost at his side, Cold periodically looking back to see if he was still there. “You fear that what you see and hear is a placebo. That no one wants to help you, no one can understand you. That it's easy to speak sanely without being in your skin.”

“I didn't ask for a psychoanalysis.” Paco started.

“And because I believe you, if things go wrong, I want you to take *Ciro* and run,” Quiet didn't even let him build up steam. “I'll handle the Princesses.”

“What about you?”

Quiet flashed him what could have been a smile. “I'll be fine. I survived this long.”

Paco stared. “You did not,” he felt obligated to say, because what about the Razor? The first Princess? Whatever had happened with the others? “You most definitely did not.”

“But I came back.”

Paco stared some more and decided ‘being too caring’ wasn't even the first of his problems, “Okay, but that's worse. You *do* know that's worse, right?”

“Quiet, we've talked about this,” Hero interrupted, but didn't get to say much. They had arrived quicker than Paco expected. Or hoped.

The group in the back had not needed to tell Connie this was a bad idea, but they still had to look at the bright side. So many ways to ruin the Princesses' day if this turned out to be some sort of trap.

It was a pretty nice place, wooden floors, solid foundations, possibly no basements. Lots of windows if one were to count the number of curtains drawn. It wasn't the easiest of tasks to move given the amount of people trying to get to an actual room at the same time, but the girls went first, and that was that.

Connie and Oli took the lead, arriving at a livin- what the *hell* was that.

"Magnificent," Smitten said from slightly behind him.

He had no idea how to describe whatever (whoever?) was lounging on an entire brown colored sofa. Part big cat? A very long necked lion, maybe? The legs were too long, there was a horn in her forehead. Those claws looked like they could cut through metal.

It was *huge*.

It perked up in attention, gaze zeroing somewhere behind Connie. He resisted the urge to look behind him, remembering that, yes, wasn't Ave's moniker the Hunted?

The chimera lowered its head back down, opened her mouth and *talked* , “I know,” then, her gaze shifting again, “Fledgling, hello. Back for more?”

Oh, no. Oh, this was not good.

“We’ve talked about this, be nice,” Damiana said to his left, hands on her hips, making the chimera’s eyes shift just as Connie felt movement behind him -someone changing places?-breaking its line of sight.

From behind him, Connie heard Skeptic murmur, “She’s a chimera! She shouldn’t be saying *anything!*” as if ‘should’ and ‘shouldn’t’ were anything more than concepts.

Oli got over his bout of silence quickly enough, pasting his trademark fake smile. He could not straighten to his full height, something had happened when they all ended up out in the world, but he did try. “Hello! Thank you for having us! I must say, you have a lovely pla-”

Oleander dropped straight to the floor thanks to a particularly hard shove from Borja, who had walked forward like a man possessed, ignoring the beast in favor of gazing up at-

The tallest woman Connie had ever seen.

Tan skin, white hair, eyes that almost seemed to glow. Wrapped in a white dress. There was something about her expression that made Connie squint.

And then Borja dropped to his knees, bending forward to place his hands and head on the ground in front of the couch she sat upon. “I humbly implore you to pardon my absence, Your Radiance!”

Connie’s thoughts screeched to a halt at the sight of the largest Voice folding like that. He knew Borja was a downer at the best of times and utterly unfun, but he did not expect him to be so... willing to bend the knee.

He felt... uneasy? Uncomfortable? Whatever the case, this was *wrong*.

Those opalescent eyes appraised Borja, gaze aloof and face unreadable as Borja steadfastly remained prostrate. Oppy remained on the floor, looking up at the woman with some amount of trepidation.

Movement behind him, at the tail end of the group, “Oh no, let me through, let me through...” that was Quiet, probably feeling as disquieted as Connie felt.

The moment seemed to last a lifetime, neither party moving. The air was rife with tension, many in the room dreading what her next action would be dragging out the moment further. Her sonorous voice broke it, “I see my Priest has finally remembered his rightful place.”

“Yes.” He breathlessly agreed, voice only audible because of the heavy stillness in the air.

There was something reminiscent of those paintings he once saw about the way the woman stared down at Borja and he in turn was prostrated in front of her. Appraising eyes seemed to cut right through the voice, and yet he laid there unphased.

The scene was utterly broken by someone intruding in it. Caín didn’t shove Connie aside but it was a close thing. Without pausing, he leaned down and yanked Borja up like one would a

naughty cat.

“Have some dignity,” Caín drawled, and if Connie didn’t know better he would have described that tone as *disgusted*. But yanking the tallest of them up like he was nothing? That was a little concerning.

Borja pushed himself away from Caín. Borja wasn’t the nicest, but nobody deserved to be looked down like... well, like that. Someone needed to take her down a few pegs.

Before either of them could keep speaking, Connie couldn’t stop himself from whispering, “Was she such a bitch from the start?”

...maybe he could have said it at a lower volume. The chimera's ear twitched, Borja tensed up, and the woman shook her head incredulously. “Such charming audacity from one so small... you cannot address me that way.”

“My apologies,” Connie smirked and dropped his gaze. “Were you such a bitch from the start-” and then he looked up from under his lashes, “-Your Majesty?”

“No!”

And then all he could make out was the top of Quiet’s unruly mop. right at eye level. He had finally pushed to the front and was standing right in front of Connie. A shield. Which meant that one, at least to Quiet, was dangerous.

“Your Radiance, he’s not worth it-”

“We’ve talked about this too, Thelka. Be nice,” and that was Tabitha, hands on her hips too. “They’re our guests, so we’ll treat them with respect.”

“You never insult your host,” the woman - Thelka? - fired back. “Never.”

“You were the one being rude first by letting this poor man do that,” Damiana gestured empathically at Borja. “He apologized, so you have to accept it.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about me-” Borja started.

Something floated down from the top of the stairs, cutting the conversation short. At first, Connie thought it was a life-sized doll, then it straightened in midair. A brown-haired woman, wearing a strangely unsettling mask on her face and a wine colored dress. Where were her legs? Was that a ghost?

...why was he scared? His heart was beating faster all of a sudden.

“Good, you’re all here!” she crowed, doing a twirl in the air and everything. Then again, Connie was sure doing acrobatics was easier when you didn’t have to account for gravity. Then she went further up, so she could look at them in turn, “Which one are you?”

Connie turned around, almost hating himself from losing sight of the chimera. He did not envy Ave, there was danger in every corner if his instincts were right. Right at the end of the

group, Ciro and Ave closed ranks, hiding Paco from view. So this was Paco's princess. Connie couldn't blame him for being such a nervous wreck.

"At ease, Clara," Tabi cut through once more. "Take a seat before this place becomes too crowded. You can ask them things later."

Could masks pout? He was sure this one could. "But-"

"We had a deal!" Tabitha raised her voice. Miraculously, the one- Clara? - did float down to the left of Thelka. Borja had seated on the left armrest of the couch she was sitting on.

Quiet whispered something under his breath. If Connie had to guess, it was meant for Borja, with the way he shook his head. When Quiet turned around, there was despair in his expression.

Their decider was not supposed to look like that. He didn't like his insult to the tall Princess either, so what could he do to-?

There was movement down the stairs. Right, there were other Princesses. Moving aside to let them pass, he waved cheerfully at the trio- no, quintet - of conjoined women that walked down first. Sure, his first meeting with them had been a trip and a half, but that had been his fault.

He'd have to talk to them soon, if they remembered the final cabin at last.

Smitten and Damsel sat on the centermost sofa at her request, with Skeptic and Tabi near them. Skeptic kept looking at the chimera. Trying to figure her out, probably.

The next one that came downstairs was a smaller woman with a catlike grin and- was that a tail? Oh, that was *so* cool, sometimes he wished they could have remnants of their avian nature but apparently not-

Back to business, the catlike girl took one look halfway down the stairs and glanced at Oli. He had decided to slump on the stairs as he waited for the pain on his back to pass. Her expression fell in pained realization before it twisted as she pointed at him, "You!"

Oli looked straight up and spread his arms wide. That smile was not a nice one even if he tried to fix it, "Me!" he said in the same tone. "It's lovely to see you again!"

Then came- oh. Fuck.

The Razor had been hard. Not only did they have to deal with dying again and again and again against an uncaring foe, but something he was sure Gonchi had not taken into account was the mental state. That had not been a walk in the park either!

Ciro had helped a lot by himself, influencing their dear decider to focus more on winning. Connie himself and Cain had not been quite conscious by then, but they had also helped. Dulling the pain to an unhealthy level and helping Quiet take things less seriously. Not focusing on the pain, he was still able to think and plan. Even though it was useless in the end. Connie had been so tired, by the end of it.

She stopped, too, halfway down the stairs, surprisingly distracted. “Thelka, is that your little bird?”

The woman nodded with something Connie wanted to say was pride, but he couldn’t read her that well. The thing was, Borja wasn’t *anyone’s*, why were they saying so?

The Razor looked at Borja up and down. “...are you *sure*?”

“The nickname isn’t quite apt anymore,” she conceded. “But he *is* mine.”

Connie looked to the remaining ones - Quiet, Hero, Paco, Ciro, Ave. Caín in a corner. And himself. Was she looking for her ‘voice’? How was she supposed to know which one it was? Ciro and Quiet had the same scars in some places...

And then Gonchi stepped forward very blatantly.

He could swear he saw stars in Razor’s eyes as she rushed down the stairs. “That’s you? Are you sure? Look at those muscles, you wouldn’t have lost so much if-”

“What do you THINK you’re doing?!”

Something Connie was learning today: there were a lot of monstrous women in the neighborhood and he had not been aware of most of them. Those footsteps weren’t of the sound a human could make. This woman was not as tall as Thelka, but she was massive. The tank top and the leggings were struggling to hold everything. Twin horns jutted out of her forehead and a long tail was visible too.

Not to repeat himself, but that was *so cool*. Was that why Gonchi had been so sure he could have killed him? Because he had gone toe to toe with a real-life demon? Connie got the message, no more cheating. Honestly.

The demon lady did not look happy in the slightest, advancing towards the Razor with all the elegance of an upcoming train. Connie already liked her, anyone that could make the Razor retreat like that was an alright person in his book.

“Ava, it’s not what you think-”

“Let me make something clear,” Ava said, completely ignoring Razor to approach Gonchi, her arm shooting up, snagging him by the collar and pulling him to herself. Connie felt, rather than saw, movement from Ciro the moment Ava pulled Gonchi upwards as she brought her head down to him. Connie winced, expecting a devastating blow-

Their faces *slammed* together. Instead of her cracking his skull open, she had initiated a passionate kiss with such intensity Connie was certain Gonchi’s lips would be bruised.

The man in question recovered from his surprise and, despite being on his tippy toes, wrapped his arms around the back of her head to pull her deeper into the kiss that he eagerly reciprocated.

“Point taken,” Razor rolled her eyes, very unhappily setting down on the carpeted floor.

The scene in front of him was straight out of a romance film, like two lovers finally coming together after being apart for ages. And in lieu with the vibes, Connie brough his hand up to his mouth and let out a sharp wolf whistle, wiggling his raised eyebrows at them.

Gonzalo parted with her very slightly, “Shut up Connie.”

“I didn’t say anything.” Connie chuckled as he raised his hands to show his 'innocence', not even trying to hide his amusement. He was not the one who had decided to do a reenactment of a romance movie scene.

It was with his back turned to the chimera and the woman Quiet thought was dangerous that he felt a cold shiver slide down his back. He jolted, turning around to see that none of the aforementioned people had moved from their places, so what had..?

A small flash of white caught his attention and he looked down to see... worms? Coming from the floor? Well maybe this place wasn’t as nice as he first thought.

No, that couldn't be. None of the women seemed even remotely concerned. The 'worms' emerged, flickering in and out of sight and revealing themselves to be a pair of hands splayed flat on the floor. Then arms as their owner pulled themselves upwards and floaty strands of hair escaped the floor.

Connie took a step back, making Quiet and Hero come to his side, worried about his sudden change of posture.

Hero - or Nando, now - paled at the sight of the emerging upper torso of a woman, her skeletal features prominent as she stared up at them. He grasped Quiet's hand in a bone crushing grip as he squeaked out, "G-G-G-Ghost!"

A rather large part of Connie wanted to laugh. Ghosts, really, that’s what he was afraid of? Not the chimera, not the giant women, not the dollface?

Another, also large part of him made him stumble backwards into the nearest wall.

The ghost rose up from the floor entirely with a menacing grin, making the trio take several steps back towards the others. Long hair, a dress, a tiara -- another Princess. One that they had, apparently, actually killed, but it didn’t take. Good for her for twisting the narrative like that.

He meant that genuinely.

She giggled, giving a twirl of her ethereal dress and a bow. When she raised her head, her features had switched from skeletal to more humanlike. Connie didn’t notice he had been circling her in disbelief until he realized he was looking at her from a completely different angle.

“Hiya killer~” she said, and Connie could hear the smile in her voice. “Did I scare ya?”

“No,” Quiet answered with a quirk of the lips as Nando dragged him further backwards. Paco’s hand darted to Quiet’s shoulder to help, and Ave looked at the ghost in utter confusion

before going back to stare at the chimera.

Who, Connie was now realizing, had never stopped looking at him. This was not good.

Skeptic's jaw had dropped. "How- how are you possible?"

Smitten had fixated into a different topic. "Hiya *what?*"

The ghost turned around, not before practically wrapping herself around Quiet, the tatters of her spectral dress forming wispy trails behind her that curled around his form. "Water under the bridge, Sweet-heart. It's fine. He's a sweet guy."

"He's not yours," Cain said from where he was sitting. There was something in his gaze that made Connie shiver. Maybe it was from the spectre's proximity. Where was his princess then?

"Wait," Ciro interrupted, forgetting about the mate still in hand and gesturing. He hissed at the scalding water burning him, but didn't drop the object. "You're telling me it didn't even take?! Since when is that fair?!"

"That's rich for you to say," the spectre answered.

Nando had been counting under his breath, "Now that we're all here, can you please tell us why you invited us?" *before things get out of control*, Connie still heard.

Tabi hesitated, "I think it'd be best if we showed you..? Have a seat."

"...be quick."

Now, there were not enough couches, but there were enough cushions. Connie took his seat with the group closest to the door. Ave, Hero, Quiet, Ciro, Paco. Borja stayed with that woman, Gonchi and the demon lady went beside Smitten. The catgirl was a bit away from the group, same with Cold and Oli.

Connie wasn't sure if either Nando nor Quiet had realized they hadn't unlinked hands yet, but he was not about to tell them. The ghost had not relinquished her spot surrounding Quiet either, but at least he didn't seem to mind.

"You're telling me none of you told them?" the catgirl - Winnie, she'd said her name was - asked while rolling her eyes. "Of course they're all tense. We want you guys to play a game."

"That's it?" that came from Gonchi. Tabi turned on the TV and clicked on an icon they were unfamiliar with.

"What sort of game?" that was Ciro, living up to his moniker.

"What is the prize?" asked Oli, and there was a slight glint in his eyes that promised nothing good. If Connie knew something about him, it was that he was greedy. He'd have to hide his other books better once they got home.

“Well, this isn’t so bad,” Nando sighed in relief. “There’s not much that can go wrong while playing a game,” he even grinned at the spectre. She smiled back.

“Do you remember last time we tried to play WAR?” Ciro asked. Connie certainly did. It was both chaotic and amazing. “Heads would’ve rolled if Quiet here had not stepped up, and I’m not talking about Gonzalo.”

Oleander perked up in offense. “I was the other one who played with you!”

“Yeah, and you cheated like there was no tomorrow!”

"You should've seen us trying to play Monopoly," the quintet said.

The demon lady - Ava - grabbed the mouse and threw it at them with a ‘heads up!’. Connie tried to catch it, but all it did was hit Skeptic in the chest. Smirking to himself, the man focused on the screen as they all read something in white letters.

Ciro’s smirk fell flat. “A horror game? You’d love to see us squirm, I bet.”

Paco sighed from somewhere behind him. “Of course it is.”

“No, it says that there’s no wrong decisions!” Oli pointed out.

“Wait, a love story?” Smitten grinned wide. “Marvelous choice, if I do say so myself!”

There was a piano tune. A nice little melody, honestly. He could hear Paco humming it as soon as he understood the music pattern. Probably trying to ground himself.

Then the menu came in, and there was no more humming. They took a moment to take everything in. The black-and-white, the menu options, one of which was, curiously, labeled ‘Our Memories’. The basement, the cell, the princess on the screen. And of course, the title, the order every voice there had heard, their purpose, so to speak. Slay The Princess.

Caín leaned forward, and unless Connie needed his eyes checked he was almost smiling. “Isn’t this interesting?”

“Oh!” Smitten smiled, “A way to see how each of us broke our beloved princesses from their chains!”

“This isn’t funny,” Nando almost growled.

“Okay, which one of you babbled?” Oli had a grin on his face, “We’re famous and I didn’t even know? Who was it? Do I have fans?”

“We don’t know,” Tabitha answered, looking maybe a bit apologetic. “It just appeared yesterday night. We don’t know how or why.”

“I didn’t know if you’d believe me,” Damiana added.

“Maybe none of that is real,” that was Paco, talking to Quiet, who’d gone as still as a statue. “Maybe it’s a coincidence.”

“Why do you want us to see this?” Nando addressed the group at large.

“Knowledge,” Skeptic’s grin was almost predatory, eyes fixed on the screen, “There’s some things that haven’t been said, and that’s... *fine*,” yeah, no, that was definitely not fine in Skeptic’s book, “That’s a way to still gain that knowledge without anybody talking.”

“This isn’t about trust or knowledge or anything,” Quiet said, “This is about how messed up this situation is- we’re talking about our lives!”

“It’s not like we had much of a life before coming here.”

“That is NOT the point.”

“You don’t *have* to be here if you don’t want to,” Borja said curtly.

“Hablale bien,” Nando snapped at once.

Before it could devolve into yet another argument, Connie saw Skeptic pressing the ‘Continue’ button. A black screen, then an actual title screen.

Chapter I: The Hero and the Princess.

“As long as it doesn’t open with-”

The Narrator

You're on a path in the woods. And at the end of that path is a cabin. And in the basement of that cabin is a princess.

“This again?!”

"Let's keep an open mind," Connie grinned, "Now we'll have the opportunity to ruin His day in plenty more ways!"

"If I never hear those words again, it'll be too soon." Nando said.

“Maybe we will find a way to slay Him this time,” Cain proposed. Unsurprisingly, it was met with approval. Must have been a first.

- (Explore) The end of the world? What are you talking about?
- (Explore) Have you considered that maybe the only reason she's going to end the world is **because** she's locked up?
- (Explore) Killing a princess seems kind of bad, though, doesn't it?
- (Explore) Can't someone else do this?
- (Explore) Forget it, I'm not doing this.
- (Explore) Have you considered that maybe I'm okay with the world ending?
- (Explore) Do I get some sort of reward for doing this?

- Oh, okay. Thanks for telling me what to do.
- Sweet! I've always wanted to off a monarch. Viva la revolución!
- [Silently continue to the cabin.]
- [Turn around and leave.]

“Woah,” Connie’s eyes went wide without his permission.

“There’s no way those were the decider’s only avenues of thoughts.” Skeptic tapped the armrest, “He’s more complex than that.”

“I’m sorry, are you calling him simple..?” Nando, ever the loyal knight, spoke up ready to make a defense.

“There have to be some limitations, Braveheart,” the- Grace said, “Otherwise the list would be too long.”

Paco was already muttering to himself, “Second’s the detective, third is the knight, fourth is me, fifth is the lovesick one, seventh the two-faced one, eighth the mopey one, tenth the chilly one, and the last one’s you,” he had obviously noticed Connie non-too-subtly staring at him.

“Very good,” was all Connie could think to say.

The Narrator

While I appreciate the mental exercise, we are running up against a bit of a ticking clock.

Nevertheless, let me assure you: the Princess is locked up because she's dangerous, she is not dangerous because she's locked up.

And before you decide to waste even more of our time by asking how I know that, let me suggest a more pragmatic lens through which to view this situation. Causality doesn't matter here, because the end result is the same no matter what led us up to this point. If the Princess leaves the cabin, the world will end, and there is no changing that.

It's no use arguing semantics over a metaphorical chicken-or-egg, because the egg is hatched and it's about to ruin everything..

Unless, of course, you do your job and *slay her*.

“Locking someone up without explaining why would make something more aggressive from the start.” Skeptic opined, “Other than that, as frustratingly vague as ever.”

“Did you expect anything else?” Caín asked.

“I expected at least different wording.”

“At least nobody’s trusting him this time,” Paco muttered.

“Come on, we know better than that.”

- (Explore) Can't someone else do this?

The Narrator

Unfortunately, you're the only one who can pull this off. I don't make the rules. I wish I did, but I don't.

“What happened to him trying to make us think we were special?” Paco said.

“Come on, like anyone here really believed that one,” Ciro said.

“Yeah, that’s a pretty blatant attempt at buttering you up,” Winnie, surprisingly, agreed with him.

“Of course we were special,” Cain countered.

Ciro turned to him, “Really? You, of all people, believed that one?”

“It wasn’t a belief, it was the truth.”

“Whatever makes you happy.”

- (Explore) Look, I'll go to the cabin and I'll talk to her, and if she's as bad as you say she is then **maybe** I'll slay her. But I'm not committing to anything until I've had the chance to meet her face to face.

The Narrator

Then I guess we'll just have to see what happens. But a word of warning— if you go in prepared to hear her out, she could easily trap you in her web of lies. And the more you listen to her honeyed words, the harder it'll be to pull yourself out..

Then each and every one of us is doomed.

So, sure, go talk to her. See how that turns out for all of us.

“I thought you would’ve kept asking him questions,” Tabi said.

“Nah, we already had the same song and dance before and his answers won’t change,” Skeptic said.

The screen turned black for a few moments, before finally revealing a sight the boys there knew by heart. The grassy hill and the cabin itself.

The Narrator

You make your way to the short path of the cabin. You’ll find the Princess within.

Voice of the Hero

We're not going to go through with this, right? She's a Princess. We're supposed to save princesses, not slay them.

There was a smattering of applause courtesy of some of the girls. Nando buried his face in his hands, mortified.

"You've played once before," Quiet said, not as a question.

"Of course we did!" Ava said, having taken an entire bowl of popcorn for herself and Gonchi.

"He was nice," Dami said.

"The rebellious one," Thelka said. Borja nodded from his spot. Traitor.

"The voice of reason," Winnie added.

"Wait, I'm the voice of reason, not him!" Skeptic argued. "You'll see."

The Narrator

Ignore him. He doesn't know what he's talking about.

And so, the screen showed the cabin's interior, something that, once again, most Voices knew by heart. This one had no mirror, though.

"Which Voice are you?" the dollfaced one, Clara, of all people asked. Quiet didn't quite look at her when answering the question. He wasn't even shivering from Grace's presence anymore.

"I'm just Quiet," he said.

Connie sat up a little straighter. Was he actually going to try and fool them like that? Oh, this better have a good payoff...

"Yeah, he doesn't talk much in-game but he'll definitely let you know when he's disappointed in your choices," Connie talked over Smitten opening his mouth, probably to destroy their cover story.

Quiet smiled at him, "Uno es dueño de lo que calla pero esclavo de lo que dice."

"Pff, he's not the Decider," Oli of all people supported his claim, "We had to have some standards. This guy has parabolic antennas for ears, for god's sake."

"Fuck you," Quiet mouthed.

The Narrator

The interior of the cabin is almost entirely bare. The air is stale and musty and the floor and walls are painted in a fine layer of dust. The only furniture of note is a plain wooden table. Perched on that table is a pristine blade.

The blade is your implement. You'll need it if you want to do this right.

The options list were a binary: Take the blade or Enter the basement. In Connie's opinion, there should have been more to do. What about the windows, could they be broken? Take a piece of glass? Take the table as a weapon?

Honestly, the Narrator had no imagination. There were so many other potential things one could do!

"What?!" Nando, Quiet and Ave said together when Skeptic made the conscious choice to not, actually, go to the basement with the blade.

"What happened to 'being without the blade makes me feel exposed?'" Quiet snapped.

"Right, we can get others that way too..." Winnie mused.

"This is different," Cain commented.

Skeptic turned around and pointed to him, "This one gets it! If we want to get as many data points as possible, we can't just constrict ourselves to what we would do in this situation. What I would do isn't the same as what Hero would do, for example."

"Clever," Tabi smiled.

"Thank you."

The Narrator

The door to the basement creaks open, revealing a staircase faintly illuminated by an unseen light in the room below. This is an oppressive place. The air feels heavy and damp, a hint of rot filtering from the ancient wood. If the Princess really lives here, slaying her is probably doing her a favor.

"Fuck off," Ava growled, as the chimera made her displeasure known with a louder growl. Connie saw Ave pressing himself to the wall.

"So he says that every time?" Ciro wondered.

"He does need new material," Connie nodded.

"Slaying her would do a favor to nobody!" Smitten was a bit behind the topic.

The Narrator

Her voice softly carries up the stairs.

H-hello? Is someone there?

Voice of the Hero

It's hypnotizing. It's the kind of voice you only have to hear once to remember it for the rest of your life.

"Oh, you hypocrite. You were sounding like Smee there for a moment," Gonchi snarked.

"Do not call me that," Smitten said automatically with a frown, before turning to Nando, who was trying his best to disappear into thin air, "What's so bad about sounding like me? I thought you were an empiricist, my friend, but I'm glad to see you're a romantic at heart."

"¡Tragame tierra!" was the only thing Nando said, not looking at anyone. "It was a nice voice, is all."

"Like you don't do the same thing when talking about her," Connie joined in, pointing at Ava. She looked at Gonzalo in confusion, "We don't really talk, though. We just fight."

"Yeah," Gonchi shrugged, "But every time I'm with you I learn something new."

Tabi raised her eyebrow, "You're kidding."

"No," he smiled. "I think I understand poetry now."

"Wow," most of the Quintet gasped, some even blushing. Connie couldn't blame them, who knew the ex-Stubborn was capable of that?

The Narrator

Don't let it fool you. It's all part of the manipulation. You're playing a dangerous game by coming here unarmed.

- 'Hi!'
- 'Just checking in on you.'
- 'I'm here to save you!'
- (Lie) 'I'm here to save you!'
- Hey, I think I'm here to slay you?"
- Continue down the stairs.

"What kind of options are those?" Connie laughed, "I like the fourth one."

"Sometimes honesty isn't the best policy," Nando said a little behind him. "Ciro, pass me the mate?"

"You didn't help me prepare it, you get no mate." Giro said resolutely. Connie saw how his eyes strayed to the chimera, who still had not taken her gaze from Ave. From what he could see, there was no intent for her to pounce yet, but it was still worrying.

- "Hey, I think I'm here to slay you?"

Y-you must have the wrong address.

The Narrator

Great job, you've given away the element of surprise. Good luck, hero..

“The wrong address?” Winnie snorted, munching on... something. “Really?”

It was difficult to confirm due to the lighting of the room, but Connie was almost sure Dami was blushing. “There could have been another cabin nearby, who knows.”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Smee jumped at her defense, “It was a good attempt at distraction, even moreso with how improvised it was!”

“It could have been worse,” Tabi agreed.

“Didn’t I just say honesty isn’t always the best policy?” Nando sighed.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this but I agree with the goody-two-shoes,” Oli sat a little straighter. “That’s disclosing information to the enemy!”

“Why waste time with lying and deceiving, that way she can start thinking of defending herself early!” Ava countered.

“She’d be distrustful either way, why would we hide our intentions?” Skeptic said. “If she trusted us less she wouldn’t be willing to talk.”

“She would be willing,” Tabi noted as the screen changed to the basement once again, “As long as you dropped the knife.”

The Narrator

You walk down the stairs and lock eyes with the Princess. There's a heavy chain around her wrist, binding her to the far wall of the basement.

Voice of the Hero

She's beautiful. How could someone like this be a threat to anyone?

The Narrator

I am *begging* you to stay focused. There's a lot riding on you here.

H—hi. You were joking about coming here to kill me, right? D-do you think you could get me out of these chains?

Hero hid his face on Quiet’s shoulder, making Grace shift to the opposite side. Obviously, his hands weren’t enough shield for the smattering of laughter that shook the group.

Skeptic looked upwards, as if looking for a higher power, “Give me strength.”

Paco had stopped his... chant? to stare at Nando’s back in disbelief. Caín was half watching, half glaring at... one of that group. Had his focus changed ever since this started? Connie had no idea.

Skeptic didn't hesitate to select the option to talk for a bit instead of dealing with the chains. The Princess on the screen didn't seem very convinced either.

"You'd think she would have at least a cot to sleep in," he said.

"A cot wouldn't be worthy of her!" Borja interjected.

"THANK YOU!" Ava's yell made them jump. "THEY GET IT!"

- (Explore) 'What's your name?'
- (Explore) "I don't know anything about you. For all I know you're locked up down here for a reason.'
- (Explore) "If I'm the first person you've seen in a while, what have you been eating? Or drinking?"
- (Explore) "I was sent here to slay you. You're apparently supposed to end the world..."
- (Explore) "What are you going to do if I let you out of here?"
- "I'm going to keep you locked away down here. At least for a little bit. We can get to know each other better while I decide what to do." [Keep her locked away.]
- "I'm sorry, but I just can't trust you. This doesn't add up, and it isn't worth the risk to take your word over the potential fate of the world." [Retrieve the blade.]
- [Go back upstairs to retrieve the blade without saying another word]
- "I can't believe they've been keeping you down here like this! I'm getting you out of here." [Examine the chains.]
- "Okay, I'm going to get you out of here. Don't make me regret this." [Examine the chains.]

"Not easy, is it?" Quiet's voice rang in the room when Skeptic took three minutes looking at the options.

"There's so many variables and so many paths to choose from. This is exciting!" Skeptic said. Connie wasn't sure he knew he was smiling.

Quiet looked away with a huff.

- (Explore) "If I'm the first person you've seen in a while, what have you been eating? Or drinking?"

I don't see what that has to do with anything.

The Narrator

This is the only time this is ever going to happen, but I agree with the Princess. That's hardly relevant.

Voice of the Hero

Okay but actually, what *has* she been eating? She has to eat, right?

"That IS a valid question!" Skeptic clenched his free hand into a fist.

“Speaking of eating, what’s that?” Quiet pointed at whatever Winnie was happily munching on. She pointed at Oli, who immediately put a protective arm over the paper bag he had-

“Are those my cookies?” Paco asked curtly.

Oli gave him a wide grin, “Come on, Paquito-”

“It’s *Paco* for you.”

“-you couldn’t expect me to not bring them over, they’re so good...”

Winnie nodded, “I can’t believe I’m agreeing with him, but they are.”

Ciro whispered something in Paco’s ear, Connie couldn’t catch what, but he was surprisingly composed as the bag was passed around person to person.

- (Explore) "I don't know anything about you. For all I know you're locked up down here for a reason."

Of course I'm locked up down here for a reason!

I don't actually know what that reason is, but you don't just stuff a Princess in a basement and throw away the key without there being *some* sort of an explanation, right?

“See? We’re on the same wavelength!” Skeptic said, gesturing at the woman on screen with a hand that held a cookie.

“That’s called having common sense,” Clara said.

The Narrator

"You have all the explanation you need. And you should know better than to trust whatever she comes up with.

- (Explore) "I wasn't kidding when I said I was sent here to kill you. You're apparently going to end the world."

I—is that why they threw me down here? But I don't want to hurt anyone. I—I like the world!

I think.

I don't remember much about it, to be honest. I've been down here for so long.

Voice of the Hero

That's... How long has she been locked away?!

“Too long.”

“Longer than you think, Hero. Longer than you think.”

“It’s not like we had a calendar down there.”

Such were the sort of statements that followed after that question.

Did they tell you *how* I’m supposed to end the world?

- (Deflect) "What are you going to do if I let you out of here?"
- "I've been told enough."
- "I was hoping you'd tell me."
- "No. But I'm sure they have their reasons for keeping that information secret from me."
- "No. Which is why I don't think you're actually dangerous."
- [Remain silent.]

“Good idea, detective,” Oli called out, “Let’s see what she has to say about that.”

They haven't shared a thing, have they? All they've done is point a finger.

At the end of the day, whatever the two of us have going on down here is about trust.

Whoever sent you to 'slay' me *claimed* I was a threat to the world, but they didn't tell you why.

I don't trust that, and I don't think you do, either, or you wouldn't have come down here to talk.

Voice of the Hero

She has a point. We're talking like this for a reason.

So this shouldn't be about what I'd do if I got out of here, or me saying the right thing to convince you to save me... This is about how *messed up* this whole situation is! This is my life we're talking about! Do you really think I can even end the world? Why would I even want to?

“She truly has a way with words, able to convince even the hardest of hearts!” Smee said.

“It is a compelling argument, to be sure,” Nando said, almost lost in his thoughts.

We both know that if there's people we can't trust in this situation, it's whoever locked me down here, and it's whoever sent you here. And those two groups are probably one and the same.

The Narrator

Don't let her turn the tables here. This isn't about trust. This is about **risk**. We stand to lose everything, all for the sake of one person. And a subjugating monarch, no less.

“I’m convinced,” Skeptic decided. “I’m going to let her out of there.”

“Finally!” Winnie sighed. “You think too much!”

The Narrator

You're only making this more difficult...

Thank you, thank you!

The Narrator

You're making a huge mistake.

Voice of the Hero

No. You're doing the right thing.

The Narrator

You walk up to the chains binding the Princess to the wall and give them a tug.

They're large and heavy, far too solid for you to even imagine trying to break them apart.

I'm guessing you don't have the key.

Voice of the Hero

Maybe it's somewhere upstairs.

The Narrator

Doubtful. Whoever locked the Princess away down here intended for her to never see the light of day. They wouldn't have just left the key to her chains somewhere in the cabin.

- 'And if there isn't a key... do you have any other ideas?
- I'm going to check upstairs. Maybe the key's still lying around somewhere up there. And if not, maybe I can at least find something to break you free.'

Maybe there's some way to break the chains? Or if that doesn't work I guess we can always cut me out of them.

The Narrator

She offers the suggestion with almost complete nonchalance.

Voice of the Hero

If we were stuck down here for long enough, I'm sure we'd be nonchalant about cutting our way out if it meant we could finally be free.

"Even you got it," Caín said, "Just stop feeling the pain, it is that simple."

The chimera raised her head in confusion, "What are you talking about, Unclaimed?"

Paco stared. "Did you just say pain is psychological?"

"I did."

"Pss, Scarf," Winnie said, suddenly near Connie, "Is there something wrong with his brain?"

"You know, I'm not too sure," Grace answered for him as the screen changed to that of a closed wooden door.

The Narrator

You attempt to make your way out of the basement, but the door at the top of the stairs slams shut. You hear the click of a lock sliding into place.

Voice of the Hero

Is someone else here?

"Back down we go!" Skeptic said, "If I recall correctly, there was no way to break open the door."

"Isn't there? Interesting, that never happened with me," Caín said.

The Narrator

You make your way to the bottom of the stairs. This would have been so much easier if you'd just taken the blade like you were supposed to.

Voice of the Hero

Easier for *whom*?

The Narrator

Easier for everyone. Look at the mess you're in.

The screen, once again, returned to the chained Princess.

Skeptic looked at Nando with a raised eyebrow. "That was a good question! What happened to you then, did you feign being dimwitted just to annoy me?"

"Don't talk to him like that," Quiet hissed out all of a sudden, "We were all doing the best we could, and he's not dumb."

"You don't need to defend me," Connie heard Nando whisper to Quiet.

"Yes he did, that was rude," Grace said.

I heard the door slam... they locked you down here too, didn't they?

The Narrator

There's a slight panic rising in the Princess' voice.

If I could just get out of these chains I *know* we could force our way out of here together.

Almost every boy jumped at the unexpected image of the Princess chewing her arm off.

“...ew,” was all Oli could say, face slightly green. Ave, on the other hand, had turned pale.

“That determination is admirable,” Smee said, ever the hype man.

“I told you,” Caín, for his part, radiated smugness, “Not feeling pain is easy, I *told* you.”

The Narrator

She barely hesitates before raising her arm to her mouth, her teeth tearing through her limb with the determination of a trapped wolf.

As she rips her flesh from her bone, a sound comes from behind you. The clang of bouncing metal.

It's the blade from upstairs. You're not sure how it made its way down here, but if there's a time to strike, it's now.

Voice of the Hero

Or we could use it to free her.

The Narrator

You won't like what happens if you do that.

- [Save the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

“That’s strange. We only had one option when we played yesterday,” Clara commented.

“Clearly there’s a difference between us and them playing,” Thelka said.

The Narrator

Ugh. Fine.

Against your better judgment, you place the blade against the ragged, self-inflicted wound on the Princess' arm, just above the unyielding chain binding her to this place.

Connie couldn’t help but laugh at the perspective trick making the in-game Princess’s eyes look huge.

“What big eyes you have!”

“All the better to see you with!” Dami answered, to his surprise. Not one to let a joke fade out, Connie talked on.

Winnie had moved seats again, “What big hair you have!”

“All the better to charm you with,” Winnie grinned a smile with dark edges. She had four cookies at hand.

Connie looked to the right once again. And decided he could let jokes fade away after all. He was not going to keep that one going if two of the Princesses that could answer were a haunted doll or could give the Big Bad Wolf a run for his money.

The Narrator

You cut into her flesh. The blade is sharp, and it takes little effort to crack through the bone of her arm.

Her limb falls to the ground, and the heavy chains follow suit.

Voice of the Hero

She didn't so much as utter a sound through the whole ordeal.

The Narrator

No. She didn't.

She smiles softly as her gaze meets yours, blood from her wounded arm dripping rhythmically to the ground.

Voice of the Hero

How is she still smiling after everything? It's like she isn't even bothered by what just happened.

Caín looked positively chuffed. “Just don't feel the pain.”

Dami turned to him, “Really? Is it that easy?”

“Yes, really.”

“Don't listen to him, my dear,” Smitten said before glaring at Caín, “Not feeling anything at all would be tantamount to a curse.”

“I don't know, I've never tried it,” Dami was pensive for a bit.

“If you can't feel anything you can't laugh at jokes, don't listen to him,” Connie added.

Thank you. Now let's get out of here.

- [Approach the locked door.]

The screen went black. Unlike all the other times, the text remained.

The Narrator

No. We won't have any of that. The stakes are too high. You can't just let her escape into the world... no. I can't just let her escape into the world.

As the Princess approaches the bottom stair, your body steps forward and raises the blade.

Voice of the Hero

Wait... this isn't fair. You can't just do that!

The Narrator

Watch me.

Wh-What are you doing?

Connie saw Tabitha grasp Damiana's hand and Winnie flinch. He saw Quiet shudder.

And saw how Ciro's rage, which he'd been keeping a tight lid on, boiled over, "He can do that?! That's not fair-- we're not some *puppet* for Him to control! Just because we didn't want to kill her?! How is that logical, if he could do it all along why didn't he?! That's not okay! THAT'S *CHEATING!*"

His voice had risen into a shout at the end, mate gripped so hard Connie worried they would find cracks on the round cup later on.

Connie leaned over, "Are you oka-?"

"Of course I'm not okay! We were building trust and now it will be gone, it won't even be our fault and we won't even be able to tell her that because our luck SUCKS!"

Winnie was watching with a strange expression on her face. Quiet's eyes were practically shining. If Connie were a betting person, he'd say he also had felt that way deep down.

"Life isn't fair," Thelka said, unbothered.

"Sometimes you get dealt a bad hand," Clara continued.

"Oooo, you're *mad!*" Razor laughed with glee. And like that, Connie saw the lid being put on again.

- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Warn her]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

Ciro stopped moving.

“It’s not that I don’t share your feelings about the underhandedness of that villain, my friend, because I do,” Smitten hurried to say, “But you see, belief can move mountains! Do you think He would have let that option there if he wanted to?”

Skeptic was more focused on another thing, “How did that feel?”

Quiet looked away, clearly not wanting to answer. Nando did it for him, “A compulsion, something very, very difficult not to do. Like stabbing her in the heart would feel so easy in comparison to warning her. It took a lot out of our Decider.”

Huh. That sounded... had they talked about that before? On screen, the Princess moved away, not as alarmed as Connie would have been in the same situation. Honestly, this was shaping up to be a lot more action-packed than his own go at it!

The Narrator

Stop that.

Something's come over you, hasn't it? Y-you know you don't have to do this, right?

The Narrator

Your body lunges forward, the blade held low, ready to sink into her heart.

But the Princess dodges, stumbling back against the wall before the blade has a chance to connect.

Stop it! Stop trying to resist me! I'm trying to get you out of here alive.

“Explaining things to us would go a long way towards obeying,” Skeptic said casually, at odds with the scene unfolding.

Connie winced in sympathy at the image of the Princess trying to defend herself, one armed and all.

- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Resist]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

It was like the air got sucked out of the room. Nobody moved for a while.

“What..?” Dami breathed, eyes wide.

“That’s not right,” Clara said.

“It has to be him, right?” Razor asked the room at large.

“Yes, it has to be Him!” Smitten decided. “Who else would keep our only way of rescuing our beloved right in our reach? We- no, you must do something to get around this! He can’t win!”

“What if it’s not Him at all?” Ciro said, and everyone in the room turned to stare at him, “What if it’s someone else pulling the strings? The Decider wasn’t fighting the Narrator before we got here... I think. Everything’s hazy.”

Connie looked for Hero’s gaze. They... they were talking about the Shifting Mound, weren’t they? Could she do that? Steer them into one track so easily? Should they say something? Should Quiet say something?

“Whoever it was, it took away our options. I don’t like having less choices,” Paco said, high strung.

Winnie just stared. “You... really couldn’t help it. You had no other choice.”

“No, we didn’t,” Nando said, with as much apology in his tone as he was able.

Skeptic looked at the women in the room, “I’m sorry.”

The Narrator

Thank you.

“...Bastard,” Quiet hissed.

On screen, the Princess’ expression subtly changed. Frustration, anger, Connie couldn’t tell.

There's no getting through to you right now, is there?

A betrayal of will is still a betrayal. You'll regret thinking of me as a helpless damsel.

"...not that there's anything wrong with being a damsel," Winnie muttered.

"The text changed..?" Borja frowned.

"She's mad," Tabi supplied.

"Hold it, how could you know he had given up? The decider hadn't moved!" Nando pointed out.

"The eyes are the windows to the soul," Winnie said.

Connie, and some others, he was sure, jumped at the sudden image that appeared on screen, the Princess pouncing, claws and fangs already growing in, mid-snarl. Even without an arm, it didn't seem to deter her any.

Even less so with the three images of her holding her own and more against a blade with only tooth and claw.

Dami had hidden her face in her hands, Tabi looked seconds away from being sick. Borja had grown pale.

"That's certainly a way," Razor hummed, "I would've never thought about it."

"Very... physical," Clara commented.

The Narrator

She pounces on you with the same animal ferocity she used to tear through her arm.

But you have a weapon. You raise the blade, digging it under her ribs, aiming directly for the heart.

It's not enough to stop her. You feel her claws on your throat, then her teeth, somehow sharp enough to pull apart your flesh and sinew with ease.

The next picture was of the Princess, half-shrouded in shadows, eyes glowing even without light. Tabi shuddered, turning her head to look at the resident chimera, "Beast..?"

She was looking at the screen, unblinking.

The Narrator

If we're lucky, the wound you managed to inflict will be enough to at least delay her escape from this place. If we're very lucky, it will kill her before she can reach the outside world.

"We're staring death in the face and He's still more focused on the Princess. Why am I not surprised?" Skeptic said casually, as if he had not seeing everything they had. The contrast

was jarring.

Oli was staring at the screen as though he didn't know what to think.

Voice of the Hero

It can't just end like this, right?

The Narrator

As much as I'd prefer for things to have gone differently, I can't deny the reality of what's happened. I'm sorry, but it's over.

Everything goes dark, and you die..

The Beast laughed, showing a mouth with too many teeth. "It seems I was wrong about you!" she chuffed, staring at a Winnie who was definitely not smiling, "You are no kitten at all!"

"I guess I'm not."

Tabi and Skeptic were pouring over one of her notebooks, comparing notes. Ciro was still fuming. Smitten was swearing vengeance on the Narrator who had forced their hand.

"Murder is never okay, but this time you literally had no other choice," Grace was saying, "I can't say I'm happy you took the life of another... us, but whatever was there was pulling the strings. And you found a way to end it."

"It still hurt," Winnie said, "I'm not forgiving you that easily."

Quiet almost smiled, "I would be worried if you did."

Paco was whispering to Quiet, "Ave's been having trouble breathing this entire time and my chant isn't helping, I don't know what's wrong with him..."

Ave was making gestures that obviously meant 'no, nothing's wrong'. Connie guessed they would have to see.

Chapter II: The Witch.

Chapter End Notes

A HUGE thanks to my friend and now beta reader, Foolish Prey, who helped me write so many scenes for this chapter!

Uno es dueño de lo que calla pero esclavo de lo que dice - You own what you don't say, but are a slave of that which you do say

¡Tragame tierra! - literally 'Land, swallow me up!', it's said when someone is deeply embraced.

Hablale bien - Talk to him properly. It basically means don't be rude

Broken - Borja

Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi/Gonzalito

Cold - Caín

Contrarian - Connie

Hunted - Avellano/Ave

Opportunist - Oleander/Oli

Paranoid - Paco, Paquito

Cheated - Ciro

Hero - Nando

Chapter 7: Keep your friends close

Chapter Summary

The boys experience their first ch 2. Surprisingly nothing has gone up in flames yet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

If Skeptic were to be honest with himself, he did not see why everyone had to be there. The other Voices weren't as eager to find the truth as he was, and the Decider actively suppressed it.

After seeing a few of those scars, Skeptic could understand why he wouldn't talk about it, but that did not mean he could actually trust him. So, not a liar in the traditional sense, but not trustworthy either.

Luckily for him in this situation, Skeptic could collect some data about what actually happened without the decider having to be harmed in the process, nor having to corner him demanding answers, how about that? Wasn't he nice?

"Is everyone okay?" Damiana asked the room at large. Skeptic was near enough to see her hands wrung her dress, on and on and on.

"Of course we're okay," Smitten reassured her before anyone else could get a word in edgewise. That was aggravating, honestly, but he had bigger concerns in mind.

"All this proves so far is that it'd have been so much easier if our dear Decider started with me instead of him," Caïn stated in his usual placid tone. From what Skeptic understood about him, he would stir the pot if things got too boring. But things were definitely not boring now..?

Nando whirled around to face him, peeking over the others. Skeptic wondered if he noticed his hand was still linked with Quiet's, "I showed him there was another way other than obeying the Narrator."

"And it turned out so well for all of us. Maybe if you tried harder, the decider wouldn't have ended up in... certain situations," his eyes flickered to where that animal was. Skeptic had no idea what could have happened, but it could not have been anything good.

That was strange. Why would Caïn of all people say that, if by Quiet's own admission he didn't directly decide anything in his route, only influence? Why would he be so direct about it?

“That’s rich coming from you!” and right on cue, Nando was voicing his thoughts aloud.

His fellow ex-voices were sharp people, most of them, shattered by the paths they chose and learned not to temper themselves, to use the pointy edges of themselves as blades. Except for Hero, who had tried to soften his edges. Skeptic had no way of knowing if the others had actually sharpened or softened. They *felt* sharp.

They were as dangerous as the connections between them fragile, like the webs of a spider—someone would pull at the loose threads of each other until they began to unravel.

Caín seemed to be that someone.

Nando was scoffing. “Don’t forget that you were ready to follow the Narrator’s orders immediately.”

“Enough,” Quiet cut in from behind him, before they could even get started. “He’s looking for a reaction, just ignore him.”

Skeptic wasn’t sure how much more he could take. The situation had made a vulture of him, hungry for dead secrets.

As much as he wanted to keep being the one with the mouse in hand, the one able to make choices (what was so bad about it, really?) he could already see cries of unfairness forming at the mere suggestion. Which Voice could be the least predictable then..?

He threw the mouse at Connie. If what he knew about the boy was right, he would not make this boring. Which would minimize Cain acting out like that.

“Really? You’re giving this to me?” Connie grinned at him.

Winnie eyed the mouse. “Let’s see how you do this, Scarf.”

The Narrator

You’re on a path in the woods. And at the end of that path is a cabin. And in the basement of that cabin is a Princess.

You’re here to slay her. If you don’t, it will be the end of the world.

“I’m getting really tired of that speech,” Gonchi grumbled.

“You only had to hear it once. Get used to it.”

“Disembodied voice narrating everything? Ugh, I wouldn’t want that,” Clara said.

- (Explore) I’m getting a terrible sense of déjà vu.
- (Explore) Wait... hasn’t this already happened?
- (Explore) Okay, no.
- (Explore) But I died! What am I doing here?
- (Explore) Oh, you bastard! You’re in for it now. I’m wise to your tricks!

“Wow. That’s a lot.”

“Deja vu, I’ve just been in this place before...” Connie sang under his breath as he picked that option. A waste of a choice in Skeptic’s opinion, but who could say what passed Connie’s mind at any given moment.

The Narrator

A terrible sense of deja vu? No, you don't have that. This is the first time either of us have been here.

Voice of the Hero

If He doesn't remember what happened, then maybe it's best to keep it that way.

Voice of the Opportunist

Brilliant. We need to keep our cards close to our chest, and I'm not sure we can trust Him.

Winnie raised an eyebrow. “His name is Opportunist?”

“Wait what did you think it was?”

“Selfish Prick.”

Try as he might, Skeptic couldn’t locate the source of the snickering. As accurate as it were. Everyone had learned early on Oleander was not a reliable source of... anything really.

The Narrator

You know I can hear you, right? It's going to be a lot harder than you think to keep secrets from me.

Voice of the Opportunist

Did I say 'I'm not sure we can trust Him?' Slip of the tongue. Bit of the old brain fog. I meant to say that we should probably head over to the cabin and slay that Princess. We already know we can't trust her, so let's get on with the show.

“This is actually rather disappointing. He’s not even lying right!” Tabi commented, making Skeptic almost laugh.

Oli whipped his head around at her. “Try lying to someone inside your own head, see how easy it is!”

“You could start with changing your tone, for once,” she countered.

“No no, I’m with him, lying is hard,” Razor came to his defense with a smile full of sharp teeth.

Oli smiled back, but judging by the way he shrunk back like he wanted to become part of the wallpaper, that defense did not make him feel better.

Not at all.

- (Explore) This is more than just deja vu, though. I'm pretty sure this whole thing literally just happened.

The Narrator

We could go back and forth on this forever, and it won't get you any closer to doing your job and saving the world. So let's just agree to disagree.

“You’re dragging things out just to annoy me, aren’t you?” Ava said as she munched on a cookie.

Connie gave her a smile which showed too many teeth. “I actually didn’t mean to do that.”

- (Explore) Let's assume I'm telling the truth, and all of this really did already happen. Why should I listen to you? Why should I bother doing anything?
- [Proceed to the cabin.]
- [Turn around and leave.]

The Narrator

Those are two very different questions, but fine. I'll indulge you if that's what it takes to get you moving. Let's say for a moment that this really is the second time you've met me, or, at least, a version of me. If you're back here, I'm assuming you died, which probably only happened because you didn't listen to me.

Voice of the Opportunist

We were just weighing our options in a morally ambiguous situation. You can't blame us for weighing our options.

“Listen,” Tabi started. Her eyes darted around as though looking for support. “What he’s saying makes perfect sense. Rushing through things isn’t good, and this is a morally ambiguous situation, considering what the decision-maker and company has been led to believe.”

Oli flashed her a smile. “I like you.”

The Narrator

I can if you failed to slay the Princess, which you apparently did. So, great. Congratulations. You've been given another chance to actually do this right.

And I believe your other question was something along the lines of 'what's the point of doing anything?' If you're asking that, it sounds to me like you're making the rather dangerous assumption that your actions last time around didn't have any consequences.

Voice of the Hero

What do you mean? Of course there weren't any consequences. We were killed by the Princess, and now everyone's right back where they started. That sounds pretty consequence-free to me.

“Why were you so quick to accept the looping?” Tabi, once again.

Nando shrugged. “I guess seeing is believing?”

“No point wondering what happened before,” Cain said.

The Narrator

Yes, but, in this purely hypothetical scenario, that begs the question of how you got back here. Did 'time' simply rewind itself, or were you instead transported to a different world entirely? If it's the latter, what do you think happened after you died? Do you think the people there lived happily ever after, or do you think that the Princess, left unhindered, brought about the end to everyone and everything, just like I told you she would?

Voice of the Opportunist

That's a very good point. This Princess character seems like a lot of trouble. And if you think about it, actually slaying her probably breaks us out of this cycle, right? We don't want to be stuck here forever, do we?

“I am living proof that theory doesn't hold up,” Grace said, floating centimeters off the floor and giving the nearby people a very welcome chill. There was a storm incoming with how hot it was outside, definitely.

Skeptic wondered if the chimera was suffering underneath that thick pelt.

“Living proof?” Dami's lips twitched.

“I said what I said.”

Skeptic couldn't pretend to have much sympathy for Grace; it would be different, surely, if she were a living girl, but she was a ghost. Ghosts, quite inherently, were not what they appeared to be; as far as Skeptic understood from all his reading, ghosts were not simply dead people.

The theory he preferred was that ghosts were 'imprints' or 'reflections'; the prevailing understanding seemed to be that ghosts were not actually the souls of the dead. Perhaps at best, they were pieces of souls left behind by death; at worst, they were nothing more than a poor duplicate of the person who had passed on.

Like an old portrait, they looked the part and could even walk and talk and presumably think... but they weren't the actual person.

Voice of the Hero

You're laying it on a little thick, aren't you?

Voice of the Opportunist

Laying it on a little thick? What are you talking about? I'm sharing my honest opinions.

The Narrator

What matters is that almost everyone seems to be on the same page. So whenever you're ready, you can stop dawdling, get to the cabin, and save the world.

- (Explore) Let's talk about this Princess...
- [Proceed to the cabin.]
- [Turn around and leave.]

The Narrator

Just be quick about it.

- (Explore) She killed me last time around. How can I make sure that doesn't happen again?
- (Explore) She killed me by ripping me to pieces. Don't get me wrong, I hated it, but how can someone like that end the world?
- (Explore) To quote you from last time around, 'she's just a Princess.' Why was she able to rip me apart with her bare hands?
- (Explore) Who locked her in that basement? What is this place?
- Nevermind.

The Narrator

People locked her in that basement. And I told you what this place is. It's a path in the woods. Don't overcomplicate things.

- (Explore) If people locked her away, why couldn't they slay her? Why is this falling on me?

The Narrator

Look, I'm not supposed to say this but it's because you're special. You're the only person capable of doing this. Call it a prophecy if that helps, but it's just the way things are.

“That’s manipulative,” Paco spat out.

“Luck brought us there,” Borja blurted out, clapping a hand over his mouth at once.

“*Bad* luck,” Ciro shot back.

“It’s the truth,” Thelka countered, patting Borja on the head once. His pupils went huge, Skeptic could see that even from his position. “In one reality, at least. Even the worm could see it.”

Voice of the Hero

Oh. I didn't know we were *special*.

Clapping went around-- wait, no, those were the sounds of most of everyone facepalming.

"I thought heroes were supposed to be humble?" Cain said, already at the ready.

"There's nothing wrong with knowing one's worth!" Smitten jumped at the bait immediately.

"But don't listen to what he says, my friend," he turned to Hero.

"Hero, I trusted you," Winnie said, though the slight twitching of her lips made it clear she wasn't really disappointed.

"Okay, everyone lay off him," Connie kept going.

The Narrator

Of course you're special. Why else would you be here?

Voice of the Opportunist

Good point. That really explains almost everything.

Voice of the Hero

I'm not so sure about *that*.

Voice of the Opportunist

You know, you're right. But it explains *almost* everything.

"If you turn around and leave I will cut you," Razor told him sweetly.

Maybe it was just the way the fading sunset light was hitting him, but Skeptic could have sworn Connie went a shade paler. "I could've worked that out myself, funnily enough."

Dami turned to Oli with a sunny smile. "Don't worry, you're doing your best and that's all that matters.

Oli smiled back on reflex. "Thank you! It's nice to be appreciated! ...my best in what?"

"Lying! You almost got it!"

Laughter scattered around as Oli's smile died a painful death. "The fact not only Dami noticed but that was the only thing she could say..."

The background changed from the path in the woods to the cabin on a hill.

The Narrator

A warning, before you go any further... She will lie, she will cheat, and she will do everything in her power to stop you from slaying her. Don't believe a word she says.

Voice of the Opportunist

Don't worry. I think we've taken that lesson to heart at this point. You can trust us to get the job done.

Cain sat a little straighter at that point, why, Skeptic couldn't say.

"You're trying to manipulate Him back, aren't you?" Smitten practically begged.

"Of course, brother, I'm making him complacent!" Oli grabbed that opening with both hands.

"Idiot," Cain said loud enough for him to hear.

The Narrator

The interior of the cabin is a mess of twisted roots, the walls a chaotic weave of knotted wood that, almost as if by accident, just happened to resemble a room. The floor is damp and earthy, and the only furniture of note is a slab of mud in the shape of a shelf, with a pristine blade perched on its edge. The blade is your implement. You'll need it if you want to do this right.

Every girl turned to Ava. She took a while to realize she was being stared at. "I like this cabin, actually! Pretty rustic, looks like a hollow tree. It's very you," Ava smiled at Winnie. "Still needs more furniture, though."

"It's pretty squalid in here, don't you think?" Oli opined.

Connie took the blade immediately. Upon reading the options menu, his face fell. "Why can't I throw it away?"

"Are you insane?!" Paco almost shot up, being barely restrained by Ave digging his nails on his shoulder. "Why would you do that?!"

"That's our only advantage, you're not doing that!" Oli agreed.

Dami stood up from her seat, detangling her hands from Tabi's and Smitten's. "I'll be right back, okay?"

"Get us more food when you come back," Thelka said with a wave of the hand.

"I can do it—" Borja would have stood from where he was sitting if it wasn't for Thelka restraining him without even touching him. It twisted Skeptic's gut in a way he couldn't name.

"No need, Borja, she can get it herself," Tabitha glared at her, looking less like the chained girl Skeptic knew and more like a statue of marble.

“I have been very gracious lately, but you’re walking a razor’s edge,” she warned.

Oleander got up from his half-prone position Skeptic swore he heard his back crack several times. “I’ll go help her.”

If looks could kill, Thelka would have been frozen on the spot by Quiet’s gaze.

Tabitha shrugged, “I’m pretty good at balance.”

Voice of the Opportunist

Well, if we're grabbing a weapon, we should probably keep it hidden behind our backs. She doesn't have to know we have it.

Voice of the Hero

That's not actually a bad idea.

“But you don’t have pockets,” Razor pointed out.

“Don’t remind me,” Nando said.

The Narrator

The door to the basement creaks open, revealing a staircase dug into the muddy earth below. The ceiling is thick with roots that hang like locks of tangled hair. The weak starlight from the cabin windows behind you can barely penetrate the gloom here, only illuminating the edges of an opening below. It shines in the darkness like some kind of massive maw, waiting to swallow you up into the earth. The air smells of dirt and copper. It's thick and wet, as if your lungs are being coated in mud with each intake of breath. If the Princess lives here, slaying her would probably be doing her a favor.

“Does he say that in every chapter?” Grace was already fed up with that.

“Almost,” Quiet answered her.

Dami had come back with an orange blanket that she offered to Paco and Ave, “For the nerves. It calms me too.”

Paco seemed ready to refuse, possibly due to the heat, but Ave snatched the blanket from her hands and put it around them, “Thank you.”

She smiled back, “Welcome! Besides, that way both of us can match.”

“Both?” Cain inquired.

Dami nodded. “Twins?”

Clara’s whisper carried through the room, “Figures at least some would be pathetic enough t-”

Dami's smile seemed carved from ice, "Hold your tongue, he's my *friend*."

Smitten and Gonchi, of all people, grabbed each of her arms to get back back into place. Ava was practically glowing.

"Anyway," Damiana continued as though nothing had happened, "Locks of tangled hair... reminds me of Rapunzel! Maybe if you grew your hair out you could use it as ropes!"

Winnie blinked incredulous eyes away from what happened just before, "You're just saying that because you want to make more hairstyles for me."

"Maybe!"

"I don't know, the description of the basement does bring to mind Beast..." Tabi mused.

"That's not me," the chimera confirmed.

The Narrator

Her voice skitters up from below.

Winnie's nose wrinkled, "Ew, I'm not a spider!"

"Hey now, there's nothing wrong with spiders!" Nando said. He shrunk a bit when all eyes were on him. "They're interesting and combat a lot of bugs!"

"Keep going or he'll get going," Gonchi advised, and Connie obeyed.

Something nasty finds itself on my stairs. Come on down, don't be scared. I probably won't bite.

- I'm not nasty!
- Hello.
- Say nothing.

"Red font for Winnie, interesting," Tabi wrote something down.

"Of course she'd be mad, who wouldn't?" Grace nodded.

"You," Quiet whispered to her.

Oli chose that moment to come back with a steaming kettle. "I read somewhere that the remedy for being upset is a hot drink, so I took upon myself to make one for you all," he gave the room his best smile.

"Maybe he's trying to diffuse the tension...?" Quiet's utterly confused voice barely reached Skeptic as Oleander went around serving tea like a particularly jittery hummingbird.

"An Oleander speciality. Almost as good as my friend Paquito here. One sip and you'll understand. You've given us such an unique chance to see this I just had to repay it somehow.

A trade, you see? A gift from you and a gift from me.”

Clara, Thelka and by extension Borja, which made Beast calm enough to drink her bowlful. Even Razor accepted it. Cain took one sip.

“So!” Oli finally sat down, “What did I miss?”

But you are. You're a wretched little thing. I recognize that voice as easily as I recognized your nervous little footsteps coming up the path. I know who you are, and I remember what you've done.

“Oh. That.”

“Little? He was little to you?” Grace asked.

Winnie nodded. “Just a little bit taller than me.”

Voice of the Hero

See? She knows us. Is this enough for you to believe what we've been saying?

The Narrator

Maybe, but you shouldn't let that cloud your judgment. She's just a Princess. As long as you remember that and remain focused, slaying her will be easy.

Voice of the Opportunist

She seems friendly enough. Maybe we can talk our way out of this whole situation.

“This whole never handling things upfront is grinding my gears, but you can't believe she wants to talk. Hear her voice, she wants a fight,” Gonchi said.

The Narrator

You can't. Unless you slay her right away, she's going to break free and end the world. There's no reasoning with what she is.

Voice of the Opportunist

Look, I'm just throwing ideas out there. I like to think out loud. I'm the kind of guy who likes a discussion, don't we want to hear what everyone has to say before making any big decisions?

Voice of the Hero

Do you want to hear what everyone has to say, or do you just want to hear yourself talk?

The Narrator

You need to stop lingering. Your task is to slay the Princess, not endlessly debate about what to do with the Princess.

Voice of the Opportunist

Fine, fine. You're the boss.

“There’s nothing wrong with liking the sound of your own voice!” Smitten defended.

The Narrator

Thank you. You descend the basement steps, entering the dark room below. You can just make out the shape of the Princess in the gloom. She's huddled against the far wall, her eyes bright and glaring from amid the thick roots.

And there you are, one hand tucked away behind your back, gripping that sharp, sharp blade, no doubt.

Voice of the Opportunist

That's no fair, how would she know that?

Good.

The Narrator

She's acting like she already knows you. I guess what you said back in the woods really was true.

Voice of the Opportunist

That's pretty sharp! How'd you figure that one out?

The Narrator

Call it deductive reasoning.

Voice of the Opportunist

Well, you seem to be great at it!

Voice of the Hero

So... you really don't remember us, do you?

The Narrator

No, I don't. But you and the Princess clearly have a shared reality, even if I'm not a part of it. I won't waste time fighting you on something that's clearly true.

Voice of the Hero

You fought us on it back in the woods.

The Narrator

That was when the only perspectives we had were yours and mine.

Voice of the Opportunist

I'm just glad we could put all this behind us!

Voice of the Hero

Is it all behind us?

The Narrator

Just focus on the task at hand. I don't care if you've been here before, and I don't care if you think you'll go somewhere else after this. My world is on the line right now. So I'd appreciate it if you would take this seriously, and slay her.

Voice of the Opportunist

Let's chat her up a bit first. Maybe we can find a middle ground where everyone's happy.

The Narrator

Don't talk to her. You're just going to make things more difficult than they have to be.

Well? I seem to remember you having a tongue.

"...the wording on that was odd," Tabi muttered to herself. "...think you'll go somewhere else..?"

- (Explore) "I'm sorry about last time."
- (Explore) "Look, I made a mistake. We all make mistakes, right? I'm sure you've made mistakes."
- (Explore) "Don't worry, the blade isn't for you. Or, not for killing you. We've got to get you out somehow, right?"
- (Explore) "I get the sense that you're not happy with me."
- (Explore) "I died last time. You didn't. If anyone here shouldn't be trusted, it's you!"
- (Explore) "Look, I know, I know. Things got messy last time. But I think there's something bigger than both of us at work. We should team up."
- (Explore) "Can't you get out of those on your own? Those chains didn't stop you last time."
- (Explore) "Why do I have a nagging feeling you're going to stab me in the back if I help you out of here?"
- "I don't want to hurt you, but clearly there's some broken trust. Take this as a gesture of my goodwill." [Give her the blade.]
- "I don't trust you. Not enough to free you, and definitely not enough to get close to you. I'm leaving. Bye." [Leave her in the basement.]

- "I'd like to be straightforward with my intentions. I didn't care for how you treated me last time, and I think you might be a danger to the world. I'm going to attack you now."
[Slay the Princess.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

"For the record, the 'I made a mistake' one isn't an actual apology," Grace instructed.

"I get the sense you're not happy with me?" That's gotta be my influence, I can't believe..." Connie was laughing to himself.

"Teamwork, yes! We should get to the bottom of this!" Skeptic perked up.

"Leave her in the basement, huh?" Clara hissed, but without as much energy as it should have had.

"Announcing your intentions of killing her and then going for it," Tabi winced. "That's cold."

"Really? I would say opportunistic," Razor laughed at her own joke.

"This is already proving more interesting than my own experience," Oli said, "I mean, everyone knows the decider doesn't have much... what's the word..." Oleander trailed off.

"Gumption?" Cain interjected at once.

"Spirit?" Borja added.

"He's not very determined," Paco said with the slightest apologetic tone.

"Yeah, exactly. You know, weak-willed."

Okay, Skeptic was not aware Quiet had such a terrifying glare. He resolved to not make him mad in the future. "You guys *really* suck sometimes, you know?"

"So we've been told," Skeptic couldn't help his smile. Which was why he missed the look exchanged between Quiet and Connie.

And the nod he gave to him.

And the option he hovered over until he had already picked to give her the blade.

The Narrator

You — you can't be serious.

Voice of the Opportunist

Now hold on, we should put this to a vote. That blade is one of our most valuable assets. We can't just give it to her! What if she uses it to kill us? I vote no.

The Narrator

As do I.

Voice of the Hero

I... uh... abstain?

Voice of the Opportunist

You abstain?! She's going to kill us if we give it to her!

It made sense. For all Quiet claimed to not have favorites, the second on that list was obviously Connie. He never got tired of indulging him.

The chimera turned her gaze to Connie, "Are you stupid?"

Borja, out of all possible candidates, shoved a fist into his mouth to smother the sudden giggles at the abruptness of the insult.

"What Opportunist is saying makes perfect sense," Tabi commented. "I mean, I'm sorry Winnie but you're telegraphing your betrayal with every word and he is trying to keep us alive."

Nando's eyebrows met in the middle, "So you're saying you trust Oli?"

Oleander visibly brightened at her admission. A startled, uncontrollable laughter was coming from Quiet, quickly managed into completely silent wheezes.

"Don't start with that -- Quiet, breathe, you're turning red --, I can be trustworthy!" Oli said indignantly, waving a cookie around like a tiny shield. "I'm a little hurt here!"

Quiet took noisy breaths to get air back into his lungs, laughing all the while, "You... and... trust... in the same sentence... with a positive connotation... ahaha..." another deep breath, "I know you trust me as far as you can throw me."

Oli actually paused and looked at Quiet up and down a few times. "You're small, so pretty far I'd say."

"Why are you doing that? It doesn't make sense!" Winnie gestured to the screen.

"Exactly!" Connie said, peacockly proud of himself.

"It's giving you the choice," Quiet shrugged.

"To make up for our heinous actions," Smitten added.

"It's certainly interesting," Cain said.

- This isn't a democracy. We're giving her the blade. [Give her the blade.]
- Haha. Yeah nevermind that was such a silly idea. I'm not going to give her the blade. She clearly hates us. [[Don't do it!]

“Connie I swear to everything--”

The Narrator

You toss the blade at the Princess' feet. She eyes it with suspicion before kneeling down to pick it up.

I wouldn't have done that. Why did you?

The Narrator

You hear a clanging of metal against the dirt floor, and the chains fall from the Princess' wrist.

Voice of the Hero

She could have gotten out of those the whole time! That sneaky little...

Voice of the Opportunist

A woman after my own heart. It's a shame we just gave her a weapon, because if I were her, I'd use it on us right now.

Winnie turned to Nando, “Finish the thought. That sneaky little what?”

Nando's eyes widened. “I don't know. Honestly!”

Dami was focusing on another thing, “You slipped that out too!”

Winnie blinked, before sharing a smile with her.

Voice of the Hero

Luckily for us, you're not her.

Voice of the Opportunist

Oh, we sure think alike, though. I can promise you that. Whatever you say next, you'd better make it count.

“I guess no fighting in this one?” Ava asked hoping against hope.

The Narrator

She creeps forward, taking one cautious step at a time, until you and she are face to face.

What do you think happens now?

- That's up to you. It's why I gave you the blade. I chose last time, and I regret it. So now it's your time to choose.

- 'We're both scared and we're both hurting. If one of us doesn't make a change, we'll probably kill each other forever. Do you want that? I don't. We can be better than this.
- You're beautiful. I want to actually save you, and this feels like the only way to do it.
- If you're like someone I know, you're probably going to kill me.
- [Remain silent.]

“Why not pick the one that called her beautiful? It would not be a lie, and who doesn’t mind a compliment?” that was from, unsurprisingly, Smitten.

“Why not give her the chance to ruin His day too? Ruining people’s days shouldn’t be restricted to just us!” Connie grinned.

“It should if it ruins OUR day!” Skeptic said.

The Narrator

Her shoulders tense and her eyes dart away.

This is another trick. You're trying to sow doubt. But it's not going to work on me!

The Narrator

The Princess grits her teeth, and her cunning gaze once again meets yours. And then she buries the blade in your heart.

“...what?” Nando stammered.

“What,” echoed Borja.

“WHAT?!” and that one was Ciro.

“I’m sorry,” Winnie nods to both Nando and Quiet.

“Good job!” said an impressed Razor.

“There was no other way that could have gone,” the chimera opined, “It’s who she is. A cornered animal always strikes.”

Voice of the Hero

What?! No. No, come on that's not right!

Voice of the Opportunist

I told you. I told you this is what she was going to do.

“Great, now we have to hear him going ‘I told you so’ until our last breaths.”

The Narrator

Glee dances across her face as you fall to the ground.

Hahaha! I did it! I got you! You... you...

The Narrator

The Princess seems to tremble, her smile fading quickly, replaced with concern. Her nervous eyes brim with tears.

Why? Why did you let me do this?!

The Narrator

But you don't have the strength to respond. Nor do you have the time.

Everything goes dark, and you die.

“Birds die so easily, don’t they?” a surprised Grace commented, “I- I mean, there could have been a way to stop the bleeding or at least to drag him out of the cabin... right? I don’t know much about bodies...”

Paco seemed to be doing calculations in his head.

“Winnie, that was really mean,” Damiana said. She softened when she saw Winnie wilt slightly.

“Hey, the hands didn’t take her this time!” Clara interrupted.

Skeptic dove for his notes. “What hands? What are you talking about?”

“LOOK!” Connie’s yell stopped them mid movement.

On the screen, there was yet another black screen.

“...Connie, did you break the reality defying game?” Nando asked way too calmly.

“Of course not! That should be Ciro’s job!”

The black screen changed. To another title page. Which didn’t make sense, because there should be only two chapters. Yet there it was, almost mocking them.

Chapter III: The Thorn.

Skeptic felt his thread tremble just before Quiet’s laughter became able to be heard for just his Voices.

(bittersweetness) (amusement) Surprise.

IIIII LIVE!

My laptop died a few days before a handin regarding my thesis, had to make that handin, then the hols, had to adapt to a new laptop... but I'm back!

If you want discuss the chapters you can go to this fic's thread in the Black Tabby server!

<https://discord.com/channels/745361420106858607/1274853891372093592>

Broken - Borja

Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi/Gonzalito

Cold - Caín

Contrarian - Connie

Hunted - Avellano/Ave

Opportunist - Oleander/Oli

Paranoid - Paco, Paquito

Cheated - Ciro

Hero - Nando

Chapter 8: Sometimes you gotta bleed to know

Chapter Summary

The first chapter 3 is reached. Nothing has been broken yet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Did you know that would happen?” Thelka asked the boys at large.

Quiet turned to her, not quite looking her in the eye. "Of course not."

Yes.

Of course he had. Of course. Of course.

Grace didn't understand why he would choose to introduce himself as one of his shards, but she was happy to play along. He had played along with her 'claiming' him as the shard she had met, which... wasn't really that untrue, really.

Maybe it was too mean to call them shards. They had bodies now. Truly, they were a little realer than her, physically speaking.

They were all different from each other, but it was hard to not recognize someone she had shared a body with. Even so, part of her still couldn't believe that it was him, not with-

-the *scars* that covered his skin. The stillness of the way he carried himself. The burn marks that splashed across his palms, scattered throughout with misshapen flecks. The ragged, ugly line that cut through his neck, like someone had tried to *slit*-

She slammed the door shut on that thought, darting for the mouse on Connie's hand before Clara could get to it, "Thank you, Kaleidoscope."

If one took into account the side eyes Quiet was getting, Grace was willing to bet the 'chapter three' was a surprise to all in the room.

Except for Plethora. They didn't seem surprised. Then again, nothing seemed to surprise them much. It seemed like a given, considering they were five in one. But it was unusual in this case, like she knew it was coming.

The existence of a 'chapter 3' intrigued her. Was it something common to all of them? How would her own Chapter 3 play out, what else was there to do? A ghost couldn't become more ghost, could they?

It would be interesting to find out. Ghosts couldn't die twice, so Quiet would have had to die himself... but that was for another time. She had to stop getting sidetracked.

The woods were different. The trees were a lot thinner, starved sentinels reaching to the sky. The dense foliage was but a couple of clumps of grass struggling to live. It made Grace think of the aftermath of a fire, of nature reclaiming what was lost.

Nando seemed to be feeling as weightless as she was with the realization there was more to come, and now he watched with a strange sense of trepidation the woods the screen showed.

"The woods changed," Nando muttered, "I don't remember this at all."

Quiet did an odd sort of half smile, "It's not that important—"

"No, it *is* important!" Nando turned to him, shoulders tense, "What's happening here matters, how many chapters does this even have that I don't remember?!"

"He's right," Skeptic looked up from his notes, "First the Princess changed, then the interior of the cabin, then the woods. There's an escalation. But an escalation to what?"

"The thing in the dark," Tabi answered, half-focused on her own notes.

Skeptic raised an eyebrow. "The thing in the dark?"

It was echoed by Quiet, tilting his head. Grace's lips twitched, so that was what they were going to call whatever the entity was?

"Spoilers!" Razor smiled.

The Narrator

You're on a path in the woods—

Voice of the Cheated

She stabbed us! She actually stabbed us!

"Me?" Ciro breathed out, leaning in.

"Your name was 'Cheated'?" Dami's eyebrows raised as she reached for a cookie, "That's not a very nice name."

"We all know the Decider has favorites," Skeptic pushed his glasses up.

"Hold on, why does he get to appear here? Where am I?" Oli asked in turn, frowning.

"This can't be real," Ciro's head twitched to the side, almost looking at... someone, Grace couldn't tell who. "I would remember it."

"A version of us must have lived this," Nando said, black eyes narrowed.

Voice of the Opportunist

Of course she stabbed us. We gave her the blade. Which, might I add, I voted against.

Oli sighed in relief, “There I am.”

“Unfortunately,” Winnie muttered.

Voice of the Cheated

But the whole point was that she wasn't supposed to do that. The whole point of giving her the blade was to break the cycle of violence. And she just... she just killed us anyway!

“I thought you wanted to fool me twice!” Winnie blurted out.

“Nobody here blames you for that,” Smitten interrupted.

Ciro crossed his arms. “I do! You stabbed us!”

Voice of the Hero

I guess it really doesn't matter that she killed us though, right? We're back here, which means that everything's fine. Or fine-adjacent Maybe she won't be as keen to betray us this time. We've already proven to her that we can change. Maybe that's all it'll take to show her there's another way to do things.

Smitten perked up, “Oh, I see where this is going!”

Skeptic turned to him, “Where is this going?”

“Are you familiar with the three act structure?” Smitten continued without waiting for an answer, “Beginning, conflict, and end.”

Thelka seemed to be thinking it over, “The second chapters would be the low point.”

“Precisely, Your Grace!” Smitten went on, emboldened by the fact someone understood, “By cruelly turning on the Princess in her moment of vulnerability, we made ourselves an enemy. But by mastering our fear and insecurity and handing over our power-”

“We killed ourselves.” Ciro finished for him.

Maybe it was Grace's imagination, but Smitten's smile had become the tiniest bit fixed. “No. The Act Three is the resolution.”

Voice of the Opportunist

You know, maybe you're right! In which case, I suppose the only thing to do is to get back to the cabin and give it another try.

The Narrator

Give what another try, exactly? You are aware that I've been listening to you, right?

Voice of the Cheated

Like that changes anything. We all know the game is rigged. It doesn't even matter if she's nice this time, I'm sure He'll find a way to turn us against each other.

“You’re not blaming her?” Tabi blurted out.

Ciro looked at her like he was doubting her intelligence. “She didn’t make us have no choice, that’s His fault.”

The Narrator

Great. So you've obviously been here before. Since you've apparently died at least once—

Voice of the Hero

Twice, actually.

The Narrator

Sure. Twice. Then I'll spare you the little introduction I had planned. You already know about the Princess, and clearly, you already know that she's dangerous. So don't muck this up. It's bad enough that this isn't your first time through.

- (Explore) This place is different. It keeps changing.
- (Explore) We're going to free her.
- (Explore) We're even now. I'm sure she understands that. But we can see what she has to say for herself when we get to the cabin.
- (Explore) I hope you don't think I'm planning on freeing her after she stabbed me in the heart.
- (Explore) Screw the cabin, what happens if we just leave?
- (Explore) You sure seem to be taking the whole 'looping' thing in stride.
- No matter what happens next, it seems like all our answers are in the cabin. Let's see this through. [Proceed to the cabin.]
- [Silently proceed to the cabin.]
- I'm done with this. Bye! [Turn around and leave.]

Ava huffed a laugh. “Two whole options about leaving, someone’s getting tired of this.”

“I’d rather not get stabbed,” Paquito said, taking concerned eyes off of Ave for a moment.

“It would be mean leaving her there. Screen-Winnie was sad when she understood you were genuine,” Dami added.

“I can feel your eyes on me, Tabi,” Grace almost laughed, “I’m asking questions, don’t worry. Let’s see... this place is different...”

The Narrator

Wonderful. If the woods themselves are changing, then that's all the more reason for you to take this seriously. It would mean your grip on things is slipping, which in turn, likely means her influence is spreading.

Tabi's scratching of pen on paper stopped. "Her influence?"

"Winnie's influence?" Razor wondered. "Her basement was very plant-y..."

"Could you do something with that?" Clara asked her.

Winnie's tail puffed up. "How am I supposed to know?! How did I even 'influence' an entire forest?!"

Voice of the Opportunist

Someone's in the know.

Voice of the Cheated

I've had enough of these annoying little secrets. If you want us to do this, you have to let us in on your game already! All of your game.

The Narrator

I've already said too much. The more information you have, the more difficult your task will be. Don't listen to her, definitely don't free her, and if you can, don't even think about her.

"That's very specific," Gonchi frowned.

"And counterproductive," Paco fretted. "When has 'don't think about it' ever worked?"

"Pity you aren't there, Smee," Connie smiled toothily. "I don't think you can not think of her."

Smitten's eyebrow did a little twitch. "I told you not to call me that," Oh, she still couldn't believe the lovesick heart did actually sound like that. Horrible. She was glad she didn't meet him in her own version of events.

Connie's grin didn't falter, "So you say... but you still answer to it."

- (Explore) We're even now. I'm sure she understands that. But we can see what she has to say for herself when we get to the cabin.

Voice of the Opportunist

Yes, good. Playing both sides. That's what smart people do, and you're the smartest in the room.

Voice of the Hero

I'm not sure it counts as 'playing both sides' if people can hear you doing it.

Voice of the Opportunist

Buddy, you're thinking in far too few dimensions. There's layers to doing this right, and I'm pretty sure the one making the choices gets that. Trust in the plan!

Voice of the Hero

Trust in what plan?

Voice of the Opportunist

The decider's plan! Sure, we don't know what the plan is yet, but that's part of the whole 'trusting' thing, isn't it? A good leader knows how and when to keep things secret. And sometimes a good leader even knows to keep things secret from himself.

Voice of the Cheated

Sure. We'll see what she has to say for herself. But don't forget that whatever she says is likely just as much lies as what He's been telling us. We should keep our cards close to our chest.

The Narrator

If I were you, I'd remember what she's done. You know how dangerous she is, and you should know that someone like her shouldn't be let loose upon the world.

Oli was staring at the screen, green eyes wide, "This is so *strange*. It's me, it's how I'd react but it's not *me!*"

"How do you keep sucking more with each sentence?" that was Winnie, in equal parts disgusted and impressed.

"Oli, I don't know what to say- Yes I do," Nando switched gears, "Don't ever 'buddy' me."

"Got it."

"She hurt you," Clara stated, some sort of static coating her words. "You should hurt her back."

"That would make us no better than her, and even then it was a moment of weakness." Tabi gave her a withering look. "We don't have to resort to cruelty."

"Dying hurts," Quiet agreed, "We should try to find a way no one ends up dead."

"We tried last time, and we still ended up with our backs broken!" Oli said, and oh? Grace would have to get that story out later. Thinking the Narrator wouldn't answer the thing about the looping, she decided to go to the cabin.

What greeted her was the hill and the cabin. Instead of trees, thorny plants reached towards the structure as though trying to get in.

The Narrator

It isn't long before you find yourself at the base of the cabin. I think it's clear where everyone stands at this point.

Voice of the Hero

I don't know if I'd say 'everyone.'

Voice of the Opportunist

Are you talking about me? I have a position. It's a good one, too.

The Narrator

Ignore him, he's just talking for talking's sake. My position is the only one that matters. The Princess is a threat to you. She's a threat to me. And most importantly, she's a threat to the world. You know what you have to do.

“My position is the only one that matters’, that only makes him look even more untrustworthy.” Tabi sighed.

Grace proceeded to the cabin, what else was there to do?

The Narrator

The interior of the cabin is hardly an interior at all anymore. The burned-out ruins merely suggest the shape of the structure that once stood here, charred wood still reeking of ash, but beneath it lies the fresh smell of spring growth after rain, the promise of new life in the wreckage of the old.

“Oh, that’s pretty.” Dami’s lips almost curled into a smile. uncaring of the destroyed cabin walls and the fact there was no roof, “This is the first time we’ve seen flowers there! And they have color!”

“What kind of flowers are those? Could we get some for here?” Ava had nothing to add interior-design wise, it seemed.

“It’s a *drawing*,” the one who technically was Grace’s shard drawled out.

Plethora was smiling, “How about the ones the boys have? It’s pretty weird.”

“Don’t let the windmill thingy fool you, it doesn’t fly if you spin it really fast, I know,” Connie sighed, then waited for a heartbeat, “I tried.”

Grace didn’t miss how his eyes were very focused on Quiet, or how they softened when he relaxed to the point she could feel it too, a small exhale that could have been a laugh escaping him.

‘Thanks,’ Nando mouthed at him from behind Quiet’s line of sight.

The Narrator

The only furniture of note is the crisped shell of what was once a table, a pristine— wait, this isn't right. There's supposed to be a pristine blade. Why isn't there a pristine blade?

Most of the boys stiffened at that.

“We’re getting less and less options every time!” Paco griped, one hand going to his hair to give it a sharp tug.

“No steel claw, huh?” Ave barely muttered next to him.

Ciro picked up that thread, “Exactly, Avito! What the fuck is this?! She stabbed us and we don’t get to defend ourselves?!”

“Because you have been oh-so-responsible with a knife before,” Winnie pointed out.

“Aw, that’s not fair! Things are so much better with knives involved!” Razor whined. Gonchi nodded in furious agreement.

“Well I agree with Winnie,” Grace spoke up. “No good comes from having a weapon.”

“The chase is fun if the stakes are raised,” Beast commented.

Grace would have called what she saw in Thelka’s gaze ‘confusion’, but only in the privacy of her own mind, “There should always be a blade.”

“...Your Radiance?” that was Borja, looking as confused as Grace herself felt.

“There should always be a choice, little bird, just like you chose,” Thelka explained, surprisingly patient, “It makes everything have meaning. There should be a blade, it is written. To not have it is anathema.”

“What kind of fight do you even think there will be?” Ava rolled her eyes skyward. “Going at it all indecisive isn’t going to help anyone.”

“Why did it change? Why now?” Skeptic muttered to himself.

“It wouldn’t change anything,” Clara said, “She could kill you before, blade or no blade I’m sure.”

“...thanks for the vote of confidence?” that was Winnie, her discomfort betrayed by her lashing tail.

Nando was muttering to himself, still processing that first change, “The woods changed and not even the blade is a constant, what if there’s a route where the blade was needed and it wasn’t there what if-” his muttering went to worst case scenarios.

“There’s a constant,” Quiet muttered to him, and Grace was sure she could only hear it because she was still very much on board with the almost cuddling she was doing, “The

woods change, the blade's gone, sure. I still have you."

Voice of the Hero

We... we gave it to her last time. She can't still have it, can she?

Voice of the Opportunist

Well, it's not here. And if she has it...

Voice of the Hero

Let me guess, you want to get all chummy with her.

Voice of the Opportunist

Look, as far as I see it, if it's between Him and her, I say we side with the one who has the weapon. It's just the smart thing to do!

Tabi had ripped off a page that presumably held theories of where, exactly, the pristine blade could be, "I keep agreeing with you and I hate it."

Oli put a hand over his heart, "That just means you have self preservation!"

The Narrator

I wouldn't be so hasty. I'm sure the blade will turn up somewhere. She can't have it, that's not how this is supposed to work.

Voice of the Cheated

Of course we don't get to make a choice about the blade. Every single time we come back here, something has to be different.

"That's what I'm saying!" Skeptic threw his hands in the air.

Cain sighed, looking at Oli in the eye, "Do you ever stop talking?"

"It's good that she has it!" Smitten proclaimed, "We just have our faith in the fair lady. We've already shown her our heart. Now she has to show us hers. That's how things work."

"Smee, her heart will go 'I will stab this bastard the moment he gets within stabbing distance!"

- (Explore) How do we even get down there? The only thing I see is that mirror.
- [Approach the mirror.]

The Narrator

You step forward and approach the scorched entryway leading to the basement, hesitating before you begin the descent.

Voice of the Cheated

Might as well take a look while we can. There's nothing else to do here now that the knife has been taken from us.

“He could have said something about the mirror!” Skeptic protested.

Grace hid a flinch as she picked the only option to wipe the mirror clean. “I was a bit hasty, sorry!”

The Narrator

You reach forward and wave your hand through the hollow entrance leading to the basement. What are you doing?

Voice of the Cheated

Figures.

Voice of the Hero

Well, it seems like the only way to go is forward, isn't it?

Voice of the Opportunist

Yes, that's where everything tends to be. Let's just put on a good face and have our wits about us.

And so they entered the basement, the screen turning black for a small bit, as the Narrator described them going past the scorched wood and into the darkness below.

“Still with me?” Grace could hear Nando whispering.

She could also feel Quiet's shoulder shifting beneath her free hand as he nodded. “Yeah. All good so far.”

The stairs to the basement were a thorny vine raising project. It seemed dangerous to step inside.

The Narrator

The stairs to the basement are covered in a fine layer of gritty ash. The air still feels warm, as if the fires that ruined this place had only recently been extinguished, yet fresh shoots of thorny branches are already weaving themselves through the soot-covered earth of the walls around you.

Their spines point courteously down towards the basement, so you're able to brush past their jagged points with ease. At least on the way down. But you don't need to think about the way back up just yet. That's a matter for after the world's been saved.

Voice of the Cheated

I'd say this feels like a trap, but you practically said as much. Yet you still want us to keep going.

The Narrator

They're only thorns, I'd say getting a few scratches in exchange for the lives of everyone in existence is a fair trade. I'm sure you'll manage.

Ciro gritted his teeth, "I hate him and his fucking voice so much. I've never seen his face and I know he has the world's shittiest beard."

Borja snorted, "What even is the world's shittiest beard?"

Ciro spared him a glance, "Definitely not yours, Borja, that'll be something majestic in no time."

The Narrator

Her voice, worn down by pain and suspicion, hobbles up the stairs.

I can't get away from you, can I? You betray me, I kill you, and you come back. You let me kill you, and you come back.

I don't know why you let me do that. I don't know what you want from me.

Dami put a hand over her mouth, "Winnie, you sound so tired..."

Tabi had a worried frown on her face, what she was thinking Grace didn't know, but she could very well guess.

Ava had the complete opposite reaction, "WHERE IS HER DRIVE!? YOU FOUGHT WELL, GIRL!"

"What do you want me to do?!" Winnie stared up at her, "It's a cycle!"

Grace herself had a pit on her stomach. The Princess she heard on the screen... there was defeat in her words. Like she was staring at death in the face.

- (Explore) "I want to figure out a way out of here. For good."
- (Explore) "I don't know what I want. I never really chose to come here."
- (Explore) "I want to free you. I mean it."
- (Explore) "I just want to talk. Really talk."
- [Proceed down the stairs.]

"See? None of that involves death or sacrifice!" Damiana pointed out triumphantly after almost choking on popcorn in her haste to speak.

“I never really thought of the fact you guys have no choice but to get to the cabin,” Winnie said.

“At least someone gets it,” Borja murmured.

“We’re not in agreement, so I guess we don’t know what we want,” Grace summarized.

I think you know how this goes. I’m down here, and I can’t leave. So come down and talk. It’s not like I can stop you.

The Narrator

You continue down the basement stairs, brushing past the smooth edges of thorns that grow more and more plentiful as you make your way forward.

That was bringing back Grace’s last memories of life. Helplessness was something she was sure nobody liked feeling, and even if ‘helpless’ wasn’t an option to her anymore, the way the Thorn was talking stung. Both of them at the mercy of another.

Then again, with how overgrown the basement was, a good shove could get the Decider straight into the thorny vines, so maybe not completely helpless.

“Don’t give up now, we haven’t even stepped into the basement!” Gonchi protested.

“She’s not wrong, she can’t escape nor can she stop us,” Cain shrugged. Or, started to shrug before a cushion nailed him straight in the face. Grace had the sneaking suspicion it had been Borja.

The Narrator

You step out into what was once a vast, open cavern, now overrun by briars and prickles and thistles, the space thick with hostile vegetation.

At the heart of it all, encased in a tight weave of vines, is the Princess, her bloody, trembling hands clutching a pristine blade.

Even Beast shuddered at the sight of the Princess trapped within the thorns. That had to hurt.

Oli was sweating bullets. Maybe it was from the heat. “That’s *mine!*”

“Excuse me? It’s not!” Nando said.

“She has the blade,” Skeptic was writing furiously, “But why now? Why not in other chapters 2? What’s the trigger? We died multiple times by her hand and she didn’t have the blade the first time.”

Grace didn’t want to imagine what would have happened if the Damsel had the blade at the beginning.

“Well, this isn’t good. How the fuck-,” *Ciro* said, narrowing his eyes at the screen before setting them on *Winnie*, “You don’t look... okay. At all.”

“Can’t you cut the vines with the blade?” *Tabi* wondered.

“I knew you’d have the knife,” *Razor* grinned, “And look at the bright side, judging that drawing, you’ll look beautiful once puberty stops.”

That tore *Winnie*’s eyes from the screen and *Grace* could swear some of her hair stood on end, “I will cut you-”

“Don’t engage or you’ll be the subject of jokes for the rest of your life as the youngest, I know.” *Quiet* interrupted. Some of the boys were not looking at him in a way that felt purposeful, and *Grace* spotted a few trying to hide smirks.

“So you have the blade?” *Gonchi* grinned, already raring to go, “Brilliant, show us what you got!”

“Oh, you look even worse up close,” *Clara* commented.

“Be nice,” *Dami* said with a sigh.

“How could you say that?” *Smitten* backed her up, “She might be injured, but that doesn’t detract from her beauty.”

“Careful now, loverboy, your girlfriend is right there,” *Winnie* said with an unexpected chuckle.

Did you know this was going to happen to me? Are you here to watch me suffer? Are you here to laugh?

“Why would we be here to laugh, who’s that cruel?!” *Dami* exploded.

“What are you talking about?!” And that was *Hurricane* *Ciro*, “You did this to yourself!”

Winnie sat to her full height, “I didn’t-”

“We offered you the blade to break the cycle of violence, you stabbed us anyway because you didn’t trust us, but this thorn stuff is not our fault! That’s not fair! We can’t control how you feel!”

Connie was quiet, and *Grace* was surprised to read guilt in his expression, “You’re here because of me. The role of ‘the Decider’ is a lot harder than I thought.”

“Don’t take it personally, there weren’t ‘good’ options there,” *Quiet* assured him.

- (Explore) "Yeah. I'm here to laugh. What did you think would happen after you killed me? Did you think I wouldn't hold it against you?"
- (Explore) "I'm not here to laugh. I'm here to free you. If you'll let me."
- (Explore) "I can cut you free. But you'll have to give me the blade."

- (Explore) [Reach for the blade.]
- "You're in a prison of your own making. I broke our cycle of violence. If you still want to wallow in it, be my guest." [Turn and leave.]
- "I guess I don't have anything left to say to you." [Turn and leave.]
- "Fine. If you're going to be like that, I'm going to leave. Have a nice life." [Turn and leave.]

"Is abandoning people your first instinct?" Clara hissed.

"Hey, Choicemaker," Ava started, and poor Quiet nearly jumped out of his skin, "That's you, right? The one writing the options? Okay, then what the fuck?"

Grace could practically hear his heartbeat trying to slow down, "You have to understand that with Oli there, most options would lean into a certain mindset. That's how that works."

"Take the blade," Cain instructed, "You've seen how helpless she is, trapped in the thistles. What can she do, stop us?"

"She could. Maybe she has more blades hidden somewhere," Razor said.

"She's afraid," Ave countered in his usual quiet tone, "We should help, but not without saying it first."

"You don't need to comfort her," Cain insisted.

"We have to make her calm down," Dami insisted.

"Agreed. You have to ask first," Grace said.

She did ask before she possessed Quiet, after all. It would have been... violating, otherwise. What Cain had said, did that mean he'd do whatever he wanted if he was sure nobody would stop him? Not considering others' feelings? That was... dangerous.

She chose to tell the Thorn she wasn't there to laugh, but to free her, she needed the blade first.

I... I want to trust you.

The Narrator

Her grip tightens on the blade.

But you're hiding something, aren't you? Why would you help me if you weren't helping yourself?

"...how is being trapped in thorns better than what happened to me? He doesn't even need a blade to hurt- he could peck my eyes out!" Winnie said before frowning, "Wait, did he have a beak? I can't remember..."

"I would think like that too," Paco admitted grudgingly.

- (Explore) "You're not the only one who yearns for freedom. I'm as trapped as you are. I think we need to leave together."

"Hey, I couldn't even read the other options!" Tabi protested, her voice the loudest among the chorus of others saying similar things.

"Being the Decider isn't all well and good if everyone is criticizing my choices," Grace murmured. How did Quiet do it?

The Narrator

The Princess clutches the blade closer to her chest.

That sounds... nice. I'm so tired of the bad blood between us. But it's hard to let it go. You've hurt me.

The Narrator

Her eyes dart away from yours for a brief moment.

And I've also hurt you.

"We can still make things right just because. There's no need to cling to the past like that. One act of kindness can spark another... at least that's what I think." Grace opined.

"Excellently put, my fair lady!" Smitten said, "We should look towards the future and embark on a different journey! Don't you see? Everyone can be made better!"

"This is a cycle," Thelka spoke, "To hurt and to heal, hurt again, heal again. It's how relationships are built. People leaning on one another. I lean on my little bird for worship, as he leans on me for meaning. I clipped his wings, for that built our bond to each other. It is how things have to be."

Beast grunted in agreement.

Grace was relieved to note she had not been the only one whose eyes had widened. She hoped that had not been literal, but with the way the game was going and the scars Quiet had gotten, how was she to know?

A few of the boys had turned stricken, concerned eyes to the tallest of them.

Damiana said nothing, but there was a glint in her eyes that told Grace she would at least try to approach Borja later. Good.

"We can still help her find her spark," Gonchi finally found his voice, hopefully filing that exchange on a 'we will talk later' corner of his mind. "Help her live again, if you don't fight for yourself then for who?"

"What if she hurts us again?" Ciro said, "If she doesn't believe us? She said she wants to trust us, but what if she can't? The whole thing isn't even our fault, we never asked to go to the

woods. She never asked to be betrayed, we were just put in a shitty situation by-" his eyes went wide, "By Him."

Grace watched as he became animated suddenly, nearly hitting Paco in the face with his frantic his gesturing got, "Neither us nor her are at blame here. Yeah, we should team up, leave that blasted cabin and the Narrator can *choke* on it."

"Spite, the best motivator!" Connie grinned.

"We haven't tried freeing her," Cain said, "And killing her is just too easy. I want something different from this."

"There's something *deeply* wrong with you," was all Borja said.

"Oh please, if you mean to insult me, find new material."

- (Explore) "Is there nothing I can say to change your mind?"
- (Explore) "Can I take the blade now?"
- (Explore) [Reach for the blade.]
- "You're in a prison of your own making. I broke our cycle of violence. If you still want to wallow in it, be my guest." [Turn and leave.]
- "I guess I don't have anything left to say to you." [[Turn and leave.]
- "Fine. If you're going to be like that, I'm going to leave. Have a nice life." [Turn and leave.]

"Can we change her mind?" Gonchi wondered.

Don't just reach for the steel claw, she's scared enough already," Ave advised.

"Then I'm just going to ask if I can take it." Grace decided.

The Narrator

Her eyes briefly meet yours, then dart back to the floor. She hangs her head in resignation.

Okay.

The Narrator

You reach towards her bloodied hands, laying your palm on her trembling fingers. For a moment, she clutches it even tighter, her knuckles going white with the effort. But then the tension fades. Her grip finally loosens, and she allows you to take the weapon. You carefully pull it free from the thorns, though they scrape at your skin, leaving red trickles of fresh blood all along your arms.

Smitten was delighted, "She trusts us. She trusts us! Doesn't that set your heart aflutter? I told you it'd go well!"

Ciro was flabbergasted. "That easy?"

Winnie halfheartedly glared at him, "It can't have been easy!"

Voice of the Cheated

I'll be damned. She really gave it to us.

Voice of the Opportunist

It feels like it's been so long since we've held real power in our hands. I wonder what we should do with it.

Voice of the Hero

We free her, obviously. It's the right thing to do.

Voice of the Cheated

I think you're right. She's as much a victim in all of this as we've been. And besides, it would really stick it to Him to free her.

"You know, you're more like Connie than you realize," Quiet said, completely unprompted.

Voice of the Opportunist

Or... hear me out. We slay her, right here, right now. She's never been so helpless, and if we don't take advantage of that, we may never get another chance!

The Narrator

That sounds like a splendid idea. You should listen to him.

Voice of the Cheated

We've all said our piece. Now it's time to make our move.

Voice of the Hero

It's two against one.

The Narrator

It's two against two.

Voice of the Hero

You don't count.

Voice of the Opportunist

And why shouldn't He count?

“Traitor,” Skeptic all but muttered.

“Siding with the enemy, really?” Connie managed to say between gritted teeth.

“Coward,” was the only thing Clara said.

“Oh, you’re awful,” Tabitha said.

“Sticking with the predictable?” Cain said.

“Oh, you scoundrel!” Smitten spat out.

Quiet was just shaking his head.

Gonchi was strangely calm, merely asking Quiet, “¿Le puedo pegar?” and not even wilting after Quiet shook his head more vigorously. Grace did catch a muttered ‘Later, then’.

There was this sort of primal rage in Ave’s eyes. In most of them, really, that went beyond normal anger after a betrayal. Grace wondered if that was a side effect of being a Voice, something not quite human.

And of course, Hurricane Ciro was back for another round, “We couldn’t even resist His influence the first time and you’re siding with him?! We can’t even get mad at Winnie right because she blames us like she was the center of the universe and the thorns mean she thinks everything is HER fault! Didn’t we just say we’re both victims here?! And now you want to stab her just because?! What makes us any better than her then?! That’s not a win, that’s just cruelty! Taking joy in someone else’s pain, just because you were hurt by them before, just because you both were placed in an IMPOSSIBLE situation, a game with NO win condition? That’s BULLSHIT!” he put a hand up to silence Oli’s barely open mouth, “CALLATE! No digas nada! Nos vamos a ir los dos juntos ahora, así que no digas nada o te parto toda la cara.”

He had to stop to breathe at that point.

“...what did he say?” Tabi muttered to her twin.

“Keep going, Grace,” Quiet said, hands over his ears.

Voice of the Hero

Because He's clearly not one of us?

Voice of the Opportunist

That doesn't matter. He's been with us the whole time, he should get a say.

So. Did you mean it? Or was I a fool to hand my life to you?

- [Cut her free.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

- "I just wanted my blade back. You're on your own." [Turn and leave.]

Ava turned her head, "Really?!"

"Sorry!" was all Quiet said.

Voice of the Opportunist

Yes! What a good idea. Let's cut her free.

Voice of the Hero

Oh, so you're suddenly team 'free her?' You can't just switch sides as soon as we make a decision.

Voice of the Opportunist

I can do whatever I want. And I believe with my whole heart that this is the right course of action. Let's free this Princess!

Voice of the Cheated

Even if he'll stick a knife in our back as soon as he has the opportunity, it's still better to have him nominally on our side. At least that gets him to shut up for a while.

Voice of the Opportunist

See, we're all friends here! United in our actions and intentions.

Voice of the Hero

Yeah, united. But the other one has a point, if it keeps you quiet, sure, we're all friends.

"Why am I not surprised?" Nando sighed.

"That one isn't me! I haven't done those things!" Oli defended himself.

"Everyone deserves a chance at redemption," Smitten tried to placate, "All that matters is that he's on the right path again!"

"Thanks, Smee- ten." Oli quickly corrected himself.

The Narrator

You take the blade to the thorny vines imprisoning the Princess, and she flinches, relaxing only slightly as the blade slices into the thick vegetation rather than her arm.

And she flinches again as the last of the vines is cut away, as if, after all of that, she's still expecting you to turn on her and stab her in the heart. But you're not going to do that, are you? Still, all it would take is a single slip of the blade.

“Such a pathetic attempt at distraction and subterfuge!” that was, of course, Smitten.

“I wouldn’t say distraction... maybe that’s all it takes? To be focused enough to ignore Him?” Tabi theorized aloud.

“It’s difficult to ignore a voice in your head, though,” Winnie said.

Voice of the Cheated

Is that really all you've got? Threatening us with an accidental misstep? I expected more from you.

Voice of the Opportunist

Our blade didn't even waver when he said that. Yeah, you're right! He's a bit of a nobody, isn't he? Good thing I've been on your side of all this since the beginning.

The Narrator

The Princess falls into your arms, tears streaking down her cheeks. I can't believe you're making me describe this. I hate you.

You actually meant it. You... rescued me.

“In any sort of tale, this is where a kiss would go,” Smitten said.

Winnie grimaced in disgust. “Ew, no. I don’t even know you guys.”

“She’s not even really rescued. There’s still vines covering her,” Clara pointed out.

Winnie’s eyes went wide with horror. “Those cover me up! I don’t want everyone seeing my stuff!”

- "Of course I did."
- "I just really hate the people who put us here."
- "Hah, no." [Slay the Princess]
- [Remain silent.]

A pillow soared through the air, passed through Grace and nearly bowled Quiet over.

"Sorry, sorry, I deserved that one..."

The Narrator

She smiles, her hand slipping into yours, and the two of you rush to the basement stairs. Shameful, really, that the same thorns that so graciously allowed you downstairs are now blocking your only way out.

Voice of the Cheated

You're getting desperate, aren't you? Even more proof that you can't actually do anything to stop us.

Voice of the Hero

We cut through those other vines just fine. They're only thorns, I'm not afraid of getting a few scrapes.

Voice of the Opportunist

I'm not even sure we need to do any cutting. We can just move them out of the way. What a pathetic showing, really.

A few pointy sticks can't keep us down here. We're both meant for so much more than this.

“What does that mean?” Tabi muttered.

“I don’t think that can be moved out of the way safely,” Skeptic noted. “The vines are too big.”

“Let’s try,” Dami prompted.

- [Cut into the thorns.]
- [Step into the thorns.]

The Narrator

As you step into the thorns covering the basement stairs, they... yield.

“That should not have worked... How?!” Skeptic’s jaw dropped.

“Magic,” Quiet managed not to smile.

“Magic nothing! Plants aren’t supposed to move like that!”

“Winnie is half cat and you’re concerned with the movements of plants?” Nando pointed out.

Skeptic grumbled to himself.

The Narrator

Both you and the Princess ascend the stairs without obstacle. This is unacceptable! The second you step out of this cabin with her, the world ends, do you hear me? What did the world ever do to you to deserve this?

Voice of the Cheated

It feels so good to hear you say that. That you're admitting you've lost, and we've bested you at your own game at last. I don't care what happens now. That's all I've wanted.

“What can I say,” Ciro said as the tension in the room bled out, “I am a simple man.”

“It does feel good to needle him like that.” Paco agreed.

Ciro laughed, “And this is why we’re friends.”

“Whatever world would condemn an innocent like her to a cycle of violence and despair isn't a world worth saving,” Smitten proclaimed.

The Narrator

You and the Princess hesitate at the cabin door. This is your last chance.

Voice of the Hero

We've already made our decision.

We're finally leaving here together, aren't we? And all we had to do was trust each other. It wasn't easy, but... I'm glad we finally could.

- [Step into your freedom.]

“You were right, Smee, that was satisfying to do,” Connie observed, “And we did ruin His day pretty spectacularly.”

Winnie was silent. Thoughtful. “Bandages, finally. And something to cover myself.”

“Would feathers suffice?” Smitten asked her, “I fear we don’t have anything else there.”

“Then you’d be cold, dummy.”

On the screen, the image looked quite pretty indeed, with the red flowers and the sky behind the Princess.

The Narrator

Hands clasped, the two of you open the door, and step out into a new day. You irredeemable murderers.

“It’s still clearly nighttime,” Skeptic couldn’t help pointing out.

“It’s so easy to rile him up, he complains the whole time!” Connie chortled.

“See, it wasn’t so bad that you can’t remember this one,” Quiet said.

Nando nodded with a sheepish grin, “I might’ve gotten a bit-”

“Overprotective?”

“What’s with the music?” Ave interrupted.

There was a silence as everyone listened. The piano of the background music had been replaced by some sort of ambient noise that wasn’t indicative of anything in nature. Grace

had heard it before.

What do we do now?

The Thorn on the screen looked happy, expectant, ready to take on the world. just like the Damsel had been before that thing took her.

“I think there’s something wrong with the screen...” Oli started.

“The screen’s fine.” Razor said.

Wh—where's everything going?

This was worse, this was a lot worse. Thorn was aware the trees were fading, was aware of something being terribly wrong.

Contrasting her other self on the screen, Winnie’s eyes were wide with terror. “What are you doing?!” she yelled at Grace, “Help me!”

She could do nothing but click again. The Princess on the screen had hugged herself.

Why is it so cold?

“What the fuck was that?!” Ciro exclaimed as a multitude of hands tore a hole in reality and stole the Princess away.

“Hands?!” Paco said, “I knew something bad was about to happen!”

“...what?” Skeptic had a frown of deep concentration in his face, trying to take it all in.

“It has to be Him!” Smitten declared, “Something took our beloved away just as we were getting a happy ending? Who else could it be?”

“Your beloved is right here,” Dami pointed out. Her tone didn’t convey it, but something in her eyes gave it away, she was slightly hurt by the comment. Tabitha had no such reservations and glared daggers (or would pristine blades be a better description?) at him.

Smitten froze for the slightest of moments, “My apologies, dearest, I misspoke. I’m just worried about the safety of our friend,” he gestured to Winnie, who was looking at the screen with terror, “And I was thinking of you, too, and the fate that surely befell you!”

“An ambush predator, huh?” Ave muttered to himself.

Cain was almost smiling, settling more comfortably in his spot, “This suddenly got a lot more interesting...”

The world on the screen, once more, faded to black, to be replaced with the mirror.

You do not get the chance to respond, nor will you ever. It's time to leave. Memory returns.

“Memory returns?” Skeptic grappled with the first thing that made sense to him. “So we’ve been here before?”

“It’s how the gameplay goes,” Clara explained, “You lose your memories at the start of every chapter one.”

Oli had noticed the mirror, and he leaned back immediately. “Nnnno. Not that!”

“I hate that thing,” Paco muttered.

“Can we just go around it this time?” Connie practically begged.

There was genuine confusion on Ciro’s face, “I don’t see what the big deal is, it’s just a mirror.”

“It’s not just a mirror,” Skeptic said.

Voice of the Hero

She's gone. Where did she go? Should we try and find her?

And there's that mirror again. Why is it here? Why now?!

“I feel anxious. Does anyone else feel anxious?” Borja fretted. Paco and Ave raised their hands slightly.

“Ignore the cowards and look,” Cain said with a sigh.

“Don’t you dare call me a coward!” Gonchi growled.

“I just did,” Cain smirked, “What are you going to do about it?”

Grace clicked again before a fight could brew.

- (Explore) Of course you're scared. This is the end, for you. But it's not the end for me.
- (Explore) It's going to be okay. Just trust me.
- (Explore) It's going to be okay. Just trust me. We've been here before, and you always get scared.
- [Approach the mirror.]

“This is new,” Razor commented.

“That first option is horrible! We’re not picking that one, right?” Dami asked the group at large.

“That’s the option of an asshole, no,” Ciro agreed.

“It’s the only true one,” Cain commented.

“And how would you know?!” Skeptic nearly rounded on him.

“Why is the second option unselectable? Why shouldn’t we trust them?” Paco questioned. None of them had an answer for that. Grace chose the third option.

Voice of the Hero

But it feels so bad! Like looking into it right now is going to be the end of everything.

Voice of the Cheated

It's going to do something to us. I can feel it.

Voice of the Opportunist

If they think it's bad, I'm with them.

“The end of everything... holy shit, does that thing kill us?!” Ciro shrunk back.

“Screw that! What happened to finding the Princess?” Ava tried to shift their focus.

“Do we have to get close?”

- It's not the end. Whatever's on the other side is going to be nice.
- It's the end for you, but not for me.
- I'll see you on the other side. It's going to be okay.

Voice of the Hero

Okay. If you say so, we'll trust you.

Voice of the Cheated

So this is all going to work out?

Voice of the Opportunist

Finally. We're going places.

“That is a *complete* lie,” Cain pointed out.

“Don’t do this,” Connie asked Grace, when they both realized the only option left on the screen was approaching the mirror.

“There’s nothing else I can do,” her useless heart clenched in her chest.

“But we’ll die,” Skeptic insisted.

The role of the Decider was a lot harder than Grace first thought, “I know.”

The voices feel small, distant, as you approach.

- [Gaze into your reflection.]

Silence as you reach forward. They're gone once again. The mirror always makes them leave. But you need to see what's in it.

And just like that, she'd killed them. She'd killed three of them, not with a blade, sure, but she still did. And Quiet had to do this every time?

Yes, they were there now, but they clearly remembered what happened. For their sake, she hoped it didn't hurt.

She gave them a little while to process it before clicking. Once again, prompted to 'gaze into their reflection'. Except...

You've grown.

"What's wrong with his hands?!" Oli's lips curled in disgust. "Were those thorns poisonous?!"

"Oh," Ave whispered, "More death."

Nando's head whipped around. Grace was pretty sure she heard a crick in his neck. "What?"

"Living bodies don't look like that. Look, the other hand's starting to drip."

Whatever Nando was about to say died as a sudden gag interrupted him. Damiana had grown beyond pale, quickly lauching herself from her seat with a hand over her mouth, "Continuewithoutme!"

Frantic running, a door opening and closing, and very faintly, retching.

Smitten darted from his seat as well, "I'll go make sure she's okay."

Silence reigned supreme for a few moments before Nando picked up where he left off, "He'll find a way out of this, I mean."

"Hm," Skeptic said, his expression gentling ever-so-slightly. Nando's belief was admirable, surely he could see that. "How confident of you."

You find yourself in The Long Quiet once again.

- [Proceed to the cabin.]

Tabi's eyebrows seemed to be trying to take off from her forehead with how high they were. Whatever thoughts she had, she didn't voice them.

"What-? The cabin?" Skeptic was puzzled, "Again?"

"Is the entire universe just a fractal pattern of cabins and woods?" Ciro fumed. "Are we this unlucky?"

The scene changed, once again, to a hill of nothingness, and a body held in hands. Only, not everyone could see they were hands.

“Fire?! What can we do against fire?!” Oli sat very straight.

Borja buried his face in his hands. “Oh, gods,” he mumbled, already dreading the scene that would inevitably show up.

- [Approach her.]

“Oh, *gods*.”

Once again, the sight that greeted them was bad. The one that was Winnie once, bound. Two arms held her own arms close in an X position, two holding her body, her eyes covered again. Her jaw being moved to speak with a voice that wasn’t her own.

Later, Oli would swear he did *not* shriek at the sight of the thing in the dark. Not even a little bit. Paco, beside him, looked as though he was barely able to keep himself from fainting onto the floor, eyes barely seen with how he had covered himself, and Ave, with the blanket Dami had given them.

It was strange, Grace thought, how when something moved in the dark, everyone’s first instinct was to go inside and hide under the covers. As if monsters couldn’t open doors and crawl into bed with you.

“What am I looking at?” that was Skeptic, sounding slightly dazed, a hand over his forehead as though to combat an oncoming headache.

“This... is a lot to take in,” Connie mumbled, taking in the Princess held like that, propped up like a puppet with its strings cut.

Flickering lights in empty cityscapes become pockets of vitality and movement. I am more than I was before. Whenever you are ready, I will wipe your slate clean once again.

Cain nodded in agreement.

“No, not metaphors!” Connie whined.

“Is that the thing in the dark?” Ave asked, to which he received nods from the girls.

“So we have been there before,” Skeptic noted. “I mean, *he* has been there before.”

“Just once, we played Dami’s chapter before this one.” Clara said.

- (Explore) "Are you the same being as you were before? How much have you changed?"
- (Explore) "What does it feel like to change like this?"
- (Explore) "When this is all done, do you know what you want to do?"
- (Explore) "You know that at the end of this—once you're finished—I'm going to kill you, right?"

“That one!” Winnie said, obviously still shaken by her onscreen kidnapping.

“Better to give Her something to look forward to.” Ciro fumed. Grace, obviously, selected it. Borja cringed. “You would really speak to a goddess that way?”

“Good for them,” Tabi hummed, a serene smile on her face. He gave her an incredulous stare.

“Do you think it’s... wise, to antagonize something with that many hands?” Oli said nervously.

There is still much to be seen. Neither of us know the depths of our being. Perhaps at the end of this, I will be the one to kill you. Or perhaps we will leave this place together, and find new horizons to discover.

“I’d love to see her try,” Gonzalo said.

“Why’s there no option to save the princess?” Smitten was back, his arm around a waxen-faced Damiana. “Whatever that is, she’s rendered two of the maidens here captive!”

“We tried before. It didn’t work,” Winnie said dully, “I’m part of her now. There’s no going back from that.”

“So She consumes you,” Ave summarized.

“But there is a way out!” Smitten pointed out as he helped Damiana sit down. “We’re all here!”

“Good point, Dashing!” Ava smiled at him with all her teeth.

“Are you okay?” Borja asked Dami. Grace was relieved to note she nodded.

- (Explore) "Everything you say feels like a riddle. Can you give me a single straight answer?"

“Yes, that one!” Skeptic said, backed up by his princess counterpart.

I’m sorry. Words are... difficult for me. They never fully weave what I wish to say. If you do not like my answers, then you need not ask me questions.

The vessels you choose to bring me carry far more meaning than anything words could say in the spaces between.

“Vessel?” one of the boys asked, Grace couldn’t tell who.

“She refers to us as part of Her. Perspectives are, to her, the same as nerves to feel the world. It’s... disturbing.” Tabi gave a full body shudder.

“What she just said is, quoting Ciro here, bullshit,” Skeptic interrupted, “Words are difficult for her? Then keep trying to explain, ask if he understood. How’s he supposed to learn if he

doesn't ask questions?"

- (Explore) "When I go back, it's as if an invisible wall closes around me. Why can I not do the same things I've done before?"

"It was She who prevented me to see my beloved on the big- um- small screen?" Smitten protested instantly, looking even more aghast – if possible.

"I did a great job as a Heroine, if I say so myself," Ava bragged, a teasing glint in her eyes, "And she was *radiant*."

Those paths lead to worlds you've already seen, and to perspectives I have already made my own. They are useless to us now. Inaccessible. The only paths of value are those that are yet untread.

"That's not very nice, is it?" Nando grumbled. "Don't go putting words in his mouth now, he never said they were useless."

"You don't have to defend me," Quiet told him, "What do *you* think?"

"It's horrible! She shouldn't just discard lives like that. Calling them useless, how dare she..."

Quiet leaned back a bit into Grace, satisfied as Nando ranted for a little while.

Cain smiled that sort-of-smile again, "I like Her."

- (Explore) "You have been kinder to me than anyone else I've met. Thank you."
- (Explore) "You have been kinder to me than anyone else I've met. Why?"

"Excuse me?!" Oli puffed up indignantly, looking like a small, angry avian.

"I can feel the love," Skeptic said without inflection.

"Are we not 'anyone'?!"

"Not even he likes us," Borja moped.

"Still with me?" Nando asked Quiet again, very lowly. It took... a concerning amount of time for him to answer back. Grace privately decided to keep an eye on him, just in case.

"Why?" The correct choice is 'why'. Why would we thank Her?" Paco steered the conversation in a different direction.

"This is a reprieve from killing people, why shouldn't we thank her?" Nando countered;

"There's too much we don't know, Paco's right, why should we thank her?" Skeptic honored his name.

"Obviously we have to thank her, it's how this works," Borja said.

“Moving on,” Grace said, tired of what promised to be an endless debate.

- (Explore) "What do you want me to bring you next time?"
- (Explore) "Do you have any thoughts on this vessel?"
- (Explore) "I don't want to hurt you, but the more times I go back, the worse I fear things will be."

Grace could feel her face twisting in place, “How can you say that? She hasn’t been hurt! That thing wasn’t hurt when you stabbed me in the heart, you killed *me!*”

She felt Quiet flinch. A vindictive part of her couldn’t help but think, *Good*. The rest of her submerged in a strange sort of guilt. He had done everything he could to make her up for it. It was complicated.

“She wasn’t the one he - you? - fell in love with,” Dami picked on that, momentarily confused as to who to address, the one on the screen or her own companion. “Was she?”

“Of course not!” Smitten replied, quick as lighting, “I have only eyes for you.”

“Last I checked, she wasn’t the one who went through the betrayal cycle, just me. Careful, though, with that many hands She could backstab you pretty easily,” Winnie added.

“How? She doesn’t even have claws,” Beast pointed out.

“Figure of speech.”

“He’s not wrong,” Thelka said, “People are extensions of a God’s will. It’s natural that, after claiming Winnie as her own, She would see no difference between the suffering Damiana and Winnifred experienced and her own. She owns them, they are Her. It’s that simple.”

“Show some respect, you are talking about human lives here!” Ava stood up, ready to give Thelka a piece of her mind.

“I am showing respect. See how gently she holds her gift? To take is a divine right.”

“You won’t be able to convince her, Ava. Keep going.” Quiet said, trembling in- no, that wasn’t fear. *Anger*.

Grace did not expect Ava to sit back down, but she did.

The vessels are shaped by memories of you, but their impulses are drawn to the edge of The Long Quiet. To them you are a gate to something more, and any hurt you've caused them is understood as a fair price for freedom. But they are only thoughts and perspectives. They are not me.

“She just said we aren’t her,” Dami raised her eyebrows.

“In the same way as my priest is not me,” Thelka clarified.

“But... he’s *not*. ”

Ciro was focused on something else, “Fair price for freedom? Since when is killing someone or letting yourself be killed a fair price for anything?!”

“Being trapped isn’t a way to live,” Ave tried to answer him.

“Well fuck that!”

“The impulses are drawn to the edge...” Skeptic mused, “Could it be the wanting to escape the cabin? Those impulses?”

“If you were chained in a basement wouldn’t you want to leave?” Clara asked him back.

The wounds they've suffered carve texture around my heart. Without them, I would be as I was before.

“Texture?! She kills us for texture?!” Winnie again, tail lashing out. “What did the skittish one say- that she consumes us? Well this Decider better find a way to make Her throw us up!”

Her hands were trembling.

“Throwing up is hard to do,” Beast commented.

“For you, maybe,” Damiana countered.

“Can’t he run?” Ave was tense, as if readying himself to do just that. By his side, Paco nodded furiously.

- (Explore) "What do you feel about me? These vessels I've been bringing you, I've hurt them."
- (Explore) "How many more vessels do I need to bring you?"
- (Explore) "And what if I don't want to bring you any more vessels? What if I just wait here forever?"
- [Destroy your body.]

“I am so proud right now,” Connie said the moment he laid eyes on the one option that refused to do what She wanted.

“It wouldn’t change anything,” Cain said, “But forever is an awfully long time. You would get bored before long. And you’d agree to what She wants.”

- Do you have any thoughts on this vessel?

“I don’t want to know what She thinks of me!” Winnie said too late, “She killed me, She killed Dami, who cares what She thinks?!”

“That must be our actual quest,” Smitten said after peeling the thrown pillows off of him and giving Damiana one to rest her head in, “When the time is right, we must rescue the maidens from yet another unjust fate!”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Nando muttered.

This one yearns for connections she feels she doesn't deserve. Even when shown compassion, she hid herself away. She will make for a cautious heart.

“I don’t want to *hear it!* I do deserve connections, and I- we are not just hearts for you to collect!” Winnie raged against the screen, against the heavens.

“You’re thinking too much like a mortal.” Thelka reminded her.

“I don’t CARE!”

Do not mourn her — she isn't alone anymore.

“Mourn... so they do die,” Cain observed.

“That’s *awful*, ” Borja whispered, staring at the screen with a mix of fear and pity. It took everything in him to keep his voice from cracking, and even so, he couldn’t stop himself from sounding afraid. “No one deserves to hear...” His words tapered off into a hesitant silence.

“At least you’re... keeping me company there?” it was a weak effort on Damiana’s part, but not one Winnie could begrudge her given her small hum of acknowledgement.

- "I'm ready to go back."

Tabi whirled around to face Grace, “Hey-”

“I don’t want to be the Decider anymore,” Grace answered. She had not been ready for the amount of responsibility it carried - she had known the Voice of the Hero, at least, and now she had to hear him die. Had to be the one to do it, in a way.

She was tired.

I will long for your return. But it will give me time to reflect on what I am. We will meet again.

“Brace yourselves,” Ava warned.

“For what?”

Everything goes dark, and you die.

A collective jump.

“Damn it, every time!” Ava grumbled.

Grace was inclined to agree. That sound of glass breaking was unnecessary in general and too loud compared to the volume of other stuff - it was impossible not to jump at it.

“Let me get this straight,” Skeptic held up a hand, “There’s this... goddess... outside the world that snatches you gals away after you step away from the cabin. I’m not even going to touch the perspective thing yet, my head is pounding. Where does the Narrator fit into all this?”

Tabi tried to peer at his notes but he moved the notebook away, “Still don’t know. Are you sure you want to keep going?”

“Do we have to?” Quiet sounded very, very tired. "It's suffering all the way through."

Grace didn’t even know *what* she would even do if she saw more tragedies taking place, be it her roommates dying, or the boys. The only thing stopping her from falling into despondency was the fact that she knew Quiet would live, against all odds, and rescue them – somehow and someway.

"Come on, Quiet, just one more, and then off we go," Oli bargained. Why?

Quiet looked around, counting under his breath, maybe who was for or against him. "...one more."

Chapter End Notes

Broken - Borja
Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi/Gonzalito
Cold - Caín
Contrarian - Connie
Hunted - Avellano/Ave
Opportunist - Oleander/Oli
Paranoid - Paco, Paquito
Cheated - Ciro
Hero - Nando

Guess who passed the thesis and is almost an actual Animator and Videogame Designer?
Me! Almost there! That's why I took so long!

Chapter 9: Now in the face of all odds

Chapter Summary

She felt like a newborn foal, her legs barely able to support her weight.

Chapter Notes

This work has been changed to the M rating. There's allusions to self-harm throughout the chapter so thread carefully.

Also, we have a Discord now where people discuss their theories and I post snippets of future chapters if you'd like to join!

<https://discord.gg/EqNQvpgJDT>

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Oli had gone straight to make more tea at some of the girls' request.

Damiana couldn't deny she felt a certain kinship towards him. They both wanted to make people happy, even if it was for entirely different reasons. Maybe she would have to talk to him about how this flipflopping between sides was not doing him any favors. If you're friends with someone, you stick by them.

Her sister was on one side of her, her... lover? on the other. She leaned in to read some of Tabi's notes.

DAMSEL

"fragment of a concept"

hands???

cold, we all felt cold

how did we get out?

the thing in the dark

vessels, perspectives. kills us?

Narrator (knew there was something going on)

Dami was in the Cabin first ~~wrong, it was all of us???~~

Voices, why are they flesh and blood now

"dashing hero" ...

he offered to kill himself. talk to Dami later.

“I can’t read this,” her lover blinked, watching over her shoulder. Tabi did not have the neatest handwriting, but that could be a strength. She needed time to think, someone to talk to.

What he had said in Thorn had to be a mistake. She was his beloved, he had said so. But why would he slip up so readily, had she done something wrong? Should she start to remind him of her presence more often?

~~What had she done?~~

No, focus.

Her friend, the nervous one with the twitching fingers as though playing a piano, (Paco... short for Francisco, maybe?) was not very happy that they’d stay for one more game. The blanket she gave him seemed to help, keeping him grounded alongside his quieter twin that Beast kept eyeing. Damiana wondered if she should say something about it, he obviously was not comfortable with that.

There was someone else with the mouse. Cain, the man her knight didn’t like.

Try as she might, Damiana couldn’t read him. He asked intriguing questions about the game, made her consider avenues of thoughts she had not yet explored. She was not sure she agreed with his stance on pain, it helped people survive after all.

Other than that, his face was carved out of ice. A part of her did not want to know what would have to happen to break it. Maybe it would be like when Gonchi’s sparks flared, and he left the room metaphorically burned down. Or how Ciro was a cyclone and left everything scattered and still. Maybe, with Cain, frost would encroach, and leave the crops dead in their fields.

She had not seen him grab the mouse at all, too distracted by the thing in the dark on the screen. No, she was *not* thinking about that now. She supposed it was easy to take things away from a ghost.

The Narrator

You're on a path in the woods. And at the end of that path is a cabin. And in the basement of that cabin is a princess. You're here to slay her. If you don't, it will be the end of the world.

The beginning of a story. A young man, a young woman and a wedding.

Or, a young man with unseen advisors, a young woman unjustly imprisoned and the woods.

Did anything matter other than they were happy together? That was where most retellings of most such stories ended. A perfect moment of leaving a prison hand in hand, eyes only on each other, neither considering what would happen next.

What did a happy ending mean, when the story was over?

- (Explore) The end of the world? What are you talking about?

- (Explore) Have you considered that maybe the only reason she's going to end the world is **because** she's locked up?
- (Explore) Killing a princess seems kind of bad, though, doesn't it?
- (Explore) Can't someone else do this?
- (Explore) Forget it, I'm not doing this.
- (Explore) Have you considered that maybe I'm okay with the world ending?
- (Explore) Do I get some sort of reward for doing this?
- Oh, okay. Thanks for telling me what to do.
- Sweet! I've always wanted to off a monarch. Viva la revolución!
- [Silently continue to the cabin.]
- [Turn around and leave.]

"Why can't we just leave?" Ave wondered in that restrained manner of his, eyes darting to a window for a moment. "Wouldn't that be safer for us?"

"I wouldn't say that," Connie said so quietly Dami almost didn't hear.

"For all we know, that thing could still catch us again," Ciro said.

It must have been scary, facing Her alone.

"We haven't tried everything in the cabin," Cain answered, swiftly clicking the option that would get them straight to it.

The sheer amount of apathy pouring out of his mouth made the entirety of Winnie's face contort with disdain. It was true that the game was taking a lot longer than they had first thought, but Cain truly did *not* need to sound so bored about it.

"Really? No other questions? Not even one?" Skeptic was not very happy with that. It made her pulse tremble. She didn't like conflict, and Skeptic wasn't very easy to read. Dami couldn't do much other than sympathize, she knew as much as him about all this.

She could swear she caught the slightest twitch of Cain's lips. "No."

The moment the cabin on top of the hill appeared on the screen, as lonely and grey as always, there was yet another interruption.

"I can't believe you're doing that. That place, that cursed cabin... it didn't just want to trap us—it *wanted* us," Paco muttered, his words growing erratic. "Each step we took, it felt like the earth was dragging us down into our grave. It mocked us, as if we were nothing but playthings in the hands of some sick, godless game. No end, no way out!"

Skeptic, to Tabi's right, lifted his gaze from his notebook, the scratching of his pencil stopping, "Dragging us down- look, if you mean going down to the basement..."

Paco wiped a trembling hand over his face, gasping for air. "That place!" he spat, his voice breaking, raw with frustration. "It was like it was choking the life from us—like it was hungry. Couldn't you feel it?"

“Then we’ll have to give it indigestion, won’t we?” Gonchi said as the Narrator on the screen gave His usual speech, and Dami didn’t have to look at him to know the fierce edge of his smile. The music suddenly stopped.

The Narrator

You take the blade from the table. It’d be rather difficult to slay the Princess and save the world without it.

A shiver went down her spine. This was new, nobody had taken the blade so far. Was that the point, or did he want to turn to violence? Was that what he wanted, the same way Ava lit up when she and Gonchi traded blows, like Tabi and Skeptic traded words? She didn’t think that was it.

“We agreed we wouldn’t take the blade!” Tabi snapped, snapping her notebook shut as Skeptic wrote something down.

Cain did not take his eyes off the screen, “Who makes the choices here?”

“This isn’t so bad,” Ava grinned, and the light of the screen struggled to reflect on her hair, which was the color of old blood, so deeply red it was almost black. “Let’s give them a show.”

To Ava, scars were considered marks of bravery. They were something to show off, something to brag about. They were badges of honor, and even though Dami wasn’t very good at fighting or anything resembling combat, she understood where Ava came from.

But not the ones she herself had inflicted.

The loops were nothing to celebrate. A patchwork of puncture wounds where the blade shredded through skin and muscle was nothing to commemorate.

Damiana knew some about herself. She was not the smartest. She liked being around people. She could bake a mean apple strudel. She was not complicated. Those first few days, with her knight, she delighted in simple pleasures. An apple. A kiss. Good intentions, kind hearts, dreams of the future.

A new world, flowers blooming beneath their feet, he had sought her out in those first weeks. Near strangers to each other. She followed him. A single dance was not worth the price of a life, but it would at least begin to settle the score.

It was dizzying, and delightful, but despite it all, Damiana thought it was a bit too bright, a bit too quick, like looking at the sun. Would it have been better at night, maybe?

And there they went, down the basement.

The Narrator

Her voice carries up the stairs.

Who's there?

The intonation was so markedly different it immediately morphed into her sister in Damiana's mind eye. Deeper than her own voice was, with none of the nervousness that permeated her own call. A raspier, harsh voice.

Clara tilted her head, Beast's ears perked up, Winnie's tail lashed around once.

Her lover (they'd talked names, for a bit. She refused to influence his choice, but he did say he was partial to the name Felipe) perked up as well, "I was not aware the dulcet tones you all make could become so..."

"Cutthroat?" Ciro completed.

"No." He seemed to be fighting back a sigh.

"Haughty?" Skeptic ventured.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Connie lean in towards Winnie, who had curled in on herself as if to sleep. "What does that mean?"

A second of silence as she whispered back.

Connie nodded to himself, "Ah, I see, being a huge **dick**."

"That's NOT what I said, Scarf!"

Voice of the Hero

She sounds... dangerous... It's almost as if she's the one in charge down here.

"She is," Thelka smiled, "I'm glad you already figured that out."

"No I'm not?" Tabi raised one eyebrow, "Come on, you all heard the knife being picked up."

"Hold it," Skeptic held up a hand, "You mean to tell me you heard that, from behind a locked door, a floor away?"

The Narrator

Don't let it fool you. It's all part of the manipulation.

- Hi!

Don't be a stranger. It's been so long since I've had any visitors, come on down.

"Would you please let me collect information here?!" Skeptic was gripping the pencil so tight Dami was half afraid it would break.

"No," Cain's tone may have not conveyed anything, but Dami wondered if he wasn't having fun riling up Skeptic specifically and clicking on things too fast for the others to read.

Voice of the Hero

She's so coldly beautiful... is she really a threat to the world?

It seemed not just Cain was having fun. Connie's absolutely *delighted* laughter proved it.

"Fuck!" Nando blurted out, not looking at anyone in the room. "I'd forgotten about that!"

"There's nothing to be ashamed of!" Felipe (Feli? That seemed like a good nickname) said, "Even a blind man can see beauty!"

That, at least, she could agree with. Identical twins and all that, the woman on the screen looked just like her sister, who looked just like her. Except for her sharper, guarded gaze.

And there you are. Are you here to kill me or something?

- What? No way. Why would you even think that?
- Okay, yeah, you caught me. I'm here to slay you.
- Nuh... nuh uh!
- 'I haven't decided yet.'
- I'm just here to talk.
- [Steel your nerves and step forward.]

"Nuh uh?" Ava guffawed again, nearly choking on a cookie.

"I was new at this, okay?" now it was Quiet's turn to be embarrassed. Dami found herself wondering if the scars he bore hurt still. Morbidly, she thought of which one of the girls there could have caused him such pain. There were so many scars on the others too.

If that were to happen again, what would she do?

- I haven't decided yet.

"What?" Grace gasped.

Cain glanced at her briefly, "Surprised?"

"Yes!" her face became more sunken, "It didn't go that way back when--"

Now, Dami wouldn't dare imply she was privy to the secrets of the resident ghost, but she was stuck with a newfound clarity that the end of the sentence would have been, *'Back when you killed me'*.

"Ignore him, he's just being an ass." Quiet dragged a hand over his face.

How about you drop the knife and the two of us just talk?

Voice of the Hero

Look how reasonable she's being. We should just drop the blade and talk things out.

The Narrator

Don't you dare.

Voice of the Hero

It's fine. We can decide what we want to do after we talk to her. Maybe she really is a monster. But killing someone in cold blood isn't very becoming of us.

"Would a crime of passion be okay, then?" Dami asked.

"Of course not- that's not what I meant!" Nando said, waving his hands as if to stop the upcoming questions.

"It's not a question about how becoming this is." Tabi blinked in confusion as she tried to process the line.

"Why not? A hero should be concerned with their image!" Oli defended, before yelping and scrambling away as Winnie repeatedly pelted him with pillows. Which Ciro was providing. "And hey, if there's no witnesses around-"

"I always advocate for the flames of passion, myself," Feli declared.

"Don't we all know it," Quiet muttered.

"...is neither an option?" Dami asked meekly.

"I'd say the passion one is better. Makes it more personal," Clara added.

"Are we talking about the crime itself, or the likelihood of getting caught?" Skeptic wondered. "Because if that's a factor-"

"Enough," Cain's voice cut through was was shaping up to be an... interesting discussion.

- [Drop it.]

"Are you okay?" both Dami and Borja said at the same time. There was something hurting in Grace's gaze, of that she was sure. She wouldn't push, but it was there.

"I didn't expect you to actually drop it," Skeptic said.

"We shouldn't restrict ourselves, didn't you say that?" Cain asked.

Skeptic didn't answer, but Dami did see that little smile. Still, Cain was going a little too fast for her.

- (Explore) Yeah, it's uh... pretty awkward.
- (Explore) A 'relationship?' Are you coming on to me?
- (Explore) How would I get you out of here?
- (Explore) I'm here because you're supposed to end the world.

- (Explore) There's people out there who think you're going to end the world. What do you have to say about that?
- (Explore) What's your name?
- (Explore) How long have you been down here?
- (Explore) Do you know why I'm here to kill you?
- Okay, we've talked enough...

“What’s the point of being the Decider if you don’t listen to the input of any of us?” Tabi asked.

Cain selected the option to tell the Princess about the world ending thing. Maybe he had wanted to do that himself, maybe he had wanted Tabi to shut up. Progress was progress. The Narrator didn’t like that, but still.

On screen, the mirage of the one who could be her sister made a face that gave Dami the shivers. Something in the hollowness of her eyes, the sudden shadows, the slight smirk.

Something that left her wary. Something that made Cain straighten a fraction of a movement. But she was looking for it, so she saw.

Is that why they threw me down here? But I don't want to hurt anyone. I like the world! I think.

Dami had never thought of how intonation could change the meaning of words. The same words she herself had said, same order, cadence all wrong. More wondering than desperate, right at the edge of mocking.

“If you’re trying to make yourself look good...” Oli started.

“She’s not doing a good job, is she?” Connie finished, breaking into a smile. Oli turned away before Connie even finished his sentence.

(didn’t see the way Connie’s face crumpled.)

I don't remember much about it, to be honest. I've been down here a long time

And the screen Princess was... examining her nails, maybe, with the most bored, irritated expression Dami had seen on her own face. On Tabi’s face.

“Did I really look like that?” There it was, a raised eyebrow. Disbelief. What did it mean that they all were the ‘first’, that they could change so much? What were they? For a moment, she felt inhuman, not real, an object given life.

She cut herself the night before, just to see if she would bleed.

Should she tell her lover about all that?

She could tell Felipe everything. Or, maybe not everything, but the important things, surely. The things that mattered. Not the things she was thinking right then, though. But that was besides the point.

Besides. She had seen Winnie long after others had gone to sleep, licking her wound. A single line, like hers. And she had been relieved, because there could have been dozens there. Dozens.

Voice of the Hero

Just how long has she been down here?

The Narrator

How long does she want you to think she's been down here?

“Does anyone remember?” Tabitha asked.

“There were no clocks,” Plethora pointed out.

“I don’t remember there being a ‘day’, either,” Grace said.

“It’s not like there was much to see in the basement,” Skeptic muttered to himself.

If I’m supposed to be capable of ending the world, then how did I wind up here, chained to a wall? Have they told you why I’m allegedly so... dangerous?

- [Remain silent.]

At the end of the day, whatever the two of us have going on down here is about trust. Whoever sent you to 'slay' me claimed I was a threat to the world, but they didn't tell you why. That doesn't sound right to me, and I don't think it sounds right to you, either. Otherwise we'd be killing each other instead of talking.

Voice of the Hero

She has a point. There's a reason I've been telling you to question this situation. And there's a reason you've listened.

“Because he needed something to do,” Feli exclaimed. Passionately? Of course. Felipe was always passionate, in everything he did. Whether it was ardent love or fervent hate, overzealous in his emotions. “I’d prefer *our* decider to take the wheel, this one doesn’t seem to have our best interests at heart.”

Tabi stopped writing, looking up. “What do you think of the decider, Quiet?”

There was something unguarded in those grey eyes, as he bluntly said, “A vessel in reverse.” Tabi dove right back to her notes, and Dami into her mind as she tried to understand what that meant. Did that mean he fragmented instead of being whole? That he held the Voices as separate people instead of consuming?

No, that was the thing in the dark, not a vessel.

A vessel like she was. Had been.

What did that mean, a vessel in reverse? What was a vessel in the first place? Something to be filled, right? She swallowed back bile again, clutching her sister's hand. She wanted to believe she was teaching the thing in the dark about love, to be kinder, that maybe things did not have to be this way.

~~And about decomposition, how bodies rotted, how the limbs paled and then there were marbling patterns, the bloating and putrefaction, the maggots, feathers falling off, the skin turning black, the fact she could see bone, by the end, the liquifying, the SMELL-~~

She could, distantly, hear Thelka say something. "Coward," and her bones rattled. Was that directed towards her? Surely not, Thelka had never talked to her like that-

She hadn't known how to use a knife in the first place, and seeing Winnie, who could've been her once upon a never, do it so easily... how did she learn? Why did Dami have to cause unnecessary pain?

Why hadn't she thrown the knife away, like her sister had suggested? Was that what she had done in her own 'chapter', was that the obvious solution? Dami didn't think- didn't even consider- she was so impulsive, so unthinking. Tabitha called her her twin, but despite sharing the same face they were nothing alike. Tabi knew things, she observed, she had notebooks upon notebooks of ideas and theories and this one she won't let Dami see because Dami was too stupid and naive. Dami hurt the one she loved because she was too scared to do it right, how to have trembling hands, she stabbed and stabbed and she couldn't look at him in the eye because she was too selfishly concerned with her own feelings and he had cried-

Someone was saying, "Please. Please don't."

She had never begged like that. She didn't even feel pain, back Then. She had forgotten so much. She could feel pain, now, but the fact she even had to check...

But what if it was easier not to? Cain had said pain was just another feeling, that it was easy to tune off. Her lover didn't like that kind of thinking. Was it okay to think like that? Was she okay? Was she okay? She didn't know, but maybe it would be easier to stop thinking those things. maybe she could talk to Felipe without wondering if she was committing a thought sin, or hiding things from him. Maybe she would stop having the impulse to place her hands over his chest and feel for the puncture marks that surely were there, a burning pain she wished could take away. Fire.

There was humming right by her ear, a melancholic sort of song.

Maybe if she wasn't so scared, she could talk to him about how much she loved him, what to do now that their story ended and she didn't feel happy enough. How much she wished he didn't need to hurt for her, how happy they could surely be. What was happiness in the first place? Why did she have to kill her beloved when the easiest option was right there, to turn the blade on hers-

There was a banging on the door. It woke her up.

Sometimes, at night, Dami would knock on her sister's door to see if she was awake, if she could sleep with her so she could push aside the visions of bloody hands and rotting corpses. Or Grace, who learned to knock on doors because she had no footsteps to announce her presence. Or Ava, making their house a home with all the grace of a stampede of deer. A lot more charming, though.

This sound was not like that, not hesitating or reckless. It was a demanding thing, a loud, jarring sort of vibration. Frightening.

There was Tabi, staring at her in naked concern, saying 'I called you twice', Skeptic, muted but not less there with graphite stains on his fingers. On her other side, Felipe, and she could see-

Something shimmering around Feli, like a caress, like a shadow, and a lot fainter around herself, just barely reaching her, making the fine hairs on her arms and neck stand up. Feli was close enough to touch and Dami couldn't understand how she had never seen the thin strands connecting him and the small one- Quiet, was it?

The song was still being hummed in her ear, an attempt to soothe her, she realized. Or maybe himself. She didn't know if he realized she could hear him. His eyes were terrified, so that wasn't working for him. She had hurt him too, hadn't she? All three of them had shared a body, and she hadn't apologized for killing them.

She passed through the strands with one hand, to see if they would break, but nothing happened. She didn't even feel them. Feli grabbed her shoulders, alarmed and unseeing. The threads faded from sight eventually and Dami didn't know how to make herself see them again, but she knew she would never break them, even if she knew how.

(She felt, more than saw, Quiet almost standing up in alarm. Cain made him sit back down with words she couldn't hear.)

She moved out of Feli's grip while the pounding on the door kept going. Paco, Ave and even Oli flinched back from the noise. What had happened when she was thinking? They were not in the basement anymore, back up the main room of the cabin and the table was blocking the door?

"I still don't get why He made us go back up instead of slaying her again," Skeptic seemed to be satisfied with how she was responding to stimuli again.

I know you're still there. Why don't you make things easier on yourself and let me out. It's not like this little door'll hold for very long anyways... and it's probably a good idea to try and get back on my 'good side.'

That voice, she knew that voice. Damiana's gaze turned to Clara, her true feelings, as always, kept behind the mask.

"That's you?!" Tabi stared at the masked woman in poorly disguised shock. Her scribbling had stopped, trying to find something that tied the floating woman and the being trying to break down the door together.

“That’s me!” Clara confirmed, absentmindedly rubbing one of her hands.

“You better start running,” Ava advised, “She snapped that chain like it was nothing, the door’s got nothing on her. How come you don’t have more muscle, Clarita?”

“Can’t believe I could’ve done that the whole time...” Tabi muttered, annoyed.

Voice of the Hero

She sounds... terrifying. Like she's less of the Princess you saw and more like something out of a nightmare.

“You’re being rude,” Clara said simply, but there was something static-y in her voice that made Dami shiver.

To his credit, Nando didn’t apologize. He just kept staring at the screen, giving Paco room to huddle closer. He was muttering something, Dami couldn’t catch what.

The Narrator

As she violently rattles the door, you do your best to shut her out of your mind.

When I get out of here I'm going to pick you apart piece by piece. I won't forget what you did, and I'll never forgive it. You don't know the kind of enemy you've made tonight.

Voice of the Hero

It doesn't sound like she's getting any weaker..

The Narrator

No. It doesn't.

“Stop that, you’re scaring him,” Ava said. “He can’t give it his all if he’s scared.”

Clara blinked. “That’s the point.”

“Is it too late to run away?” Ave insisted, quieter than a sentence like that warranted.

- 'Threaten me all you want! All it does is ease my guilty conscience.
- Whatever you are, you're not a Princess. Go ahead and waste your energy. I'll be waiting for you.
- So all of that was just an act, wasn't it? You're not really innocent or harmless. You're not even a princess. You're a monster.
- Ignore her and go to sleep.

Dami jumped into her sister, a little, when all of a sudden Ava stood, casting shadows over them and her back lit with the screen glow. With a fluid movement, she grabbed the choicemaker by the back of his shirt and plucked him out of the little group he had been part of.

“What is with you?! These options suck!” she yelled, lifting him high enough to see eye to eye.

“What’s your problem, Ava?!” Winnie huffed, suddenly awake and alert, “That thing sucks when you do it to me, why would he like that?!”

Ave sprung up, eyes seeming to glow with the screen light, and Ciro was right behind him, throwing the water from his thermos in an arc with a demand to, “Let him go!”

It hit her in the chest. Despite the water being steaming, the only affected thing seemed to be her clothes, not leaving much to the imagination. Dami politely looked away.

Ava looked at them, as if unsure that was supposed to have done anything. Quiet hadn’t yet moved at all, and there was something growing- feathers?

Ava shook him a little bit, “It was cute with Winnie, but- don't think this is a kitten scruff thing-”

“Of course it’s not-!” Ciro started, but Ava wasn’t hearing him.

Dami could see her bringing Quiet closer, “...Yeah, you better be sorry, there’s not a single good option there!” Then, a little lower, “What? Oh.”

Just like that, she put him back down carefully. Gently, even. Whatever she said to him, Dami couldn’t catch it, but Quiet’s eyes were wide with disbelief as he took back his spot on shaky legs, with Ciro and Ave following close behind. Ava returned to her seat like nothing had happened.

"Really, little bird, didn't mean to scare you like that," Ava insisted.

"Could you please not call me that?" his voice was uncertain. Unsure.

"Sure thing."

The Narrator

You put the Princess' threats out of your mind as best as you can and huddle up against the wall.

“Again with this?” Skeptic frowned deeply, “This doesn’t make sense. Putting us to sleep when the task hasn’t been completed.”

The screen went dark for a moment. Dami’s eyes went to Ave. They glowed.

The Narrator

You jolt awake in the middle of the night to silence in the cabin. The ruckus has stopped, and the door to the basement is ajar, its lock broken and the table shoved out the way.

Dami's heart leapt in her throat. Feli made some sort of sound. Quiet put his face in his hands.

"The door didn't open that way the first time," Oli pointed out. The stars outside the windows had gone out. Nighttime just didn't make stars go out. What could have happened?

"Where is she?" Beast wondered, at the same time as the Hero in the screen.

There was a short burst of static, and there was almost-Clara, floating in the air. Her mere presence made the cabin darker. Her eyes and grin contrasted eerily with the shadows on her body. There was something strange about her posture, her proportions. Like the dress wasn't falling on top of a body at all. Like there was nothing under there.

Thanks for helping me get out of that awful basement.

Oli jumped, "WHAT IS THAT?!"

"Hm," Cain merely leaned a bit further.

The princess on the screen got closer. Her expression was unhinged, flickering in and out of existence in a way unlike anything Dami had seen, and she was roommates with a ghost!

The Narrator

You try and stumble to your feet, but as the Princess draws near, it's as though your body simply stops working. It isn't all at once. The paralysis comes in waves. First your toes go numb, and then your feet, and then your legs. You lie prone on the floor of the cabin, unable to do anything but witness her approach.

Voice of the Hero

Whose side are you on?

The Narrator

Yours, of course. But I have a duty to uphold the truth. Lying about the facts of the situation doesn't change them.

"Get out of there," she heard Ave mutter. Beside him, Paco was as white as a sheet, Quiet was shaking, Nando looked unusually grim. Guilty?

"You waited until he was awake to do this, why?" Tabi asked through dry lips. Skeptic was utterly focused on his notebook.

"To deny someone their freedom so cruelly, even a fair lady such as herself would feel wrathful," Feli opined. Dami couldn't help but think this was too much.

So helpless. I can take my time with you, can't I?

Ava sat ramrod straight, turning a furious glare to Clara, “What did you do?” at her lack of response, she grew more agitated, “What the *fuck* did you do?!”

“Nothing!” Clara finally defended herself, seemingly taken aback by her response.

“You weren’t trying to get out of the cabin,” Tabi cut in, “‘Take your time with him’, what did you plan on doing, you waited until he was-” a pause, her gaze incredulous, “Were you watching him sleep?”

Oli looked like he was about to pass out.

The Narrator

She steps closer, one silent footfall at a time, cocking her head in curiosity as you feel your organs shutting down one by one.

Those huge, bulging eyes were not human. Eyes weren’t supposed to look like that, like they were independent from the body and could detach at will.

“That’s it?” Gonchi seemed focused on something else. “This is so... dispassionate.”

“Agreed,” Razor whined, “Where’s the blade? You could’ve used it.”

Or maybe I can't take my time with you. You don't look well. A little green around the gills... What a shame. If you'd only helped me get out of here. We could have done such wonderful things together.

Tabi shuddered, hand coming up her mouth as if to retch, Clearly there was something Dami wasn’t getting. All she knew was that Clara was scary, and she was causing someone pain and she didn’t seem to care.

Seemed to be causing everyone here discomfort. Even Connie seemed scared.

The Narrator

Your lungs stop drawing in breath, and your heart freezes in your chest. You have seconds left.

I'd say better luck next time, but we both know that this is the end, don't we?

Voice of the Hero

It can't be. This can't actually be how everything ends...

The Narrator

I'm sorry, but it is. Everything goes dark, and you die.

Felipe was protesting something.

There was someone in front of her. The light of the screen lit him up from behind, rendering him a shadow. On his hand, the mouse, the position of the Decider. Felipe was protesting, and Tabi was shaking her head, and Clara was arguing against her chapter title, and she could see a sort of thin smile on Cain's face.

Dami took the invitation. She felt like a newborn foal, her legs barely able to support her weight. Foreign and clunky. She slowly sank into her seat. She could make things better now, and she's apologize later, and she would talk to her sister about all this.

Just after dealing with this Nightmare.

Chapter End Notes

Broken - Borja
Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi/Gonzalito
Cold - Caín
Contrarian - Connie
Hunted - Avellano/Ave
Opportunist - Oleander/Oli
Paranoid - Paco, Paquito
Cheated - Ciro
Hero - Nando
Smitten - Felipe

Chapter 10: And no parlé with the gods

Chapter Summary

Gonchi isn't liking the utter lack of action in this chapter. Even less that it's by design.

Chapter Notes

Hello! This is a reminder that this fic has a discord! Also I'm sorry I didn't answer to every comment, apparently AO3 put a limit on that so there's no way to answer to all in a row?

<https://discord.gg/EqNQvpGJDT>

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Gonzalo wasn't liking the direction the chapter was going at all. Not the utter lack of combat, not the use of shady tactics unlike even Oleander would pull. Not the fact that one obviously wasn't a route he would appear in and he would have to wait again to see his first meeting with Ava.

His eyes slid over to Skeptic, half-embraced with Tabitha much like Gonzalo himself was. Always with something to read or write on in one way or another. The complete opposite of Gonchi, always thinking, thinking, thinking.

Oli was- huh. He was not looking at the screen at all. He was wholly focused on the animal that was taking up a whole sofa for herself.

The way he was sitting made him look like an entirely different person, the sort of intensity Gonzalo associated with doing what he did best. If he had wings, they would have been spread wide. Oli was... studying her. Her expressions. Maybe, judging if she was preparing to pounce. That was when Gonchi'd have to come in. He wasn't the tallest of their flock, but he was the first line of defense. And there were a lot of things to defend them from.

Cain's head was tilted in what might have been polite interest, if the angle hadn't been a couple of centimeters too far. As if he was hypermobile, or otherwise not quite right.

His eyes were dead, inanimate, marbles in his eye sockets with an iris and pupil printed on. There was a reason why Smee called him Alf behind his back.

(Reproach) (Amusement) It's 'Felipe' now, not Smee.

And that was Quiet, using their bond to communicate. He had tried to do it less and less, but not with him. It probably helped that Gonchi was one of the few ones permanently twisting the threads between his fingers. At least one part of him had to be in movement, and if it helped Quiet remember he was there in his corner, all the better.

Clara was still going on about the title card of her chapter. Gonchi did not think it was such a big deal, something attacking you while you were asleep more than deserved the ‘nightmare’ name.

There was no honor in that.

The girl with the mouse, Damiana, had just selected the option for having a sense of déjà vu.

The Narrator

A terrible sense of déjà vu? No, you don't have that. This is the first time either of us have been here.

Voice of the Hero

If He doesn't remember what happened, then maybe it's best to keep it that way.

Voice of the Paranoid

Shhh. What if He hears us?

“Paquito!” Ciro smiled reflexively for a moment before it wavered and fell. “Wait, that’s the kind of bullshit you hatched in? No wonder you’re... you.”

Clara chuckled as if that had been a joke.

“Paranoid, first name Properly,” Paco snapped, “You’ll see— and stop with the apologies, it’s fine.”

Obediently, Quiet faced the screen once again.

The Narrator

That's a very good question, little voice. What if He does hear you?

Voice of the Paranoid

Shit.

The Narrator

I think you'll find yourselves very hard pressed to keep any secrets from me. Not that it matters right now, because like I said, this is the first time we've met. Still, I'd rather not get off on the wrong foot. We've a world to save, after all.

“When has He ever done anything?” Oli wondered, back with another kettle. “He talks a lot, but it’s all posturing.”

“It’s not like He can do much, he’s just a voice,” Winnie added.

She was immediately silenced by the chorus of ‘HEY!’ that came forth from each of the flock. How dare she compare them to him? How dare she say they were useless?

Her tail puffed up, “Sorry!”

Damiana, it seemed, had rapid-clicked as her startle response. Oops.

Voice of the Paranoid

We couldn't trust either of you. And as far as I'm concerned, we still can't.

“A man after my own heart,” Skeptic grinned. Distrustful wrecks, the both of them. Considering the glance Tabitha gave Skeptic, she agreed. Or maybe she was worried about a triad. Either could be it.

Voice of the Hero

All we did was lock her away.

The Narrator

And how'd that work out for you?

Voice of the Hero

No comment.

The Narrator

Well then, congratulations. You've been given another chance to actually do this right.

Voice of the Paranoid

And your solution to this is to send us back in there? Do you want us to slay the Princess, or do you want the Princess to slay us?

The Narrator

Obviously I want you to slay her. One of you poses a threat to the world, and the other doesn't.

“Anyone can be a threat to anyone,” Tabi said, writing something down, “Fine, not to the world, but the Decider could be a threat to us, us to the Decider, the thing in the dark to maybe all of us...”

“You think too much.” Ava huffed.

“It is what it is,” Beast said.

The Narrator

Anyways, I believe your other question was something along the lines of 'what's the point of doing anything?' If you're asking that, it sounds to me like you're making the rather dangerous assumption that your actions last time around didn't have any consequences.

Voice of the Hero

What do you mean? Of course there weren't any consequences. We were killed by the Princess, and now everyone's right back where they started. That sounds pretty consequence-free to me.

Voice of the Paranoid

Speak for yourself. From my perspective there were plenty of consequences. I'm never going to forget the way she just made us stop working.

Paco shuddered. Gonchi could relate. The idea of being helpless against someone wasn't one he wanted to dwell on much.

There was something good that came from each having their own body, if that woman tried that again they could swarm her. Did her shutting-down aura work with multiple people? It was worth testing, if it came down to it.

...and now he was thinking like Skeptic. He wasn't about to tell him that.

The Narrator

And that's only scratching the surface. If what you said is true, it begs the question of how you got back here. Did 'time' simply rewind itself, or have you found yourself in another world altogether? If it's the latter, what do you think happened after you died? Do you think the people there lived happily ever after, or do you think that the Princess, left unhindered, brought about the end to everyone and everything, just like I told you she would?

Voice of the Paranoid

If she brought an end to everything and everyone, how are we supposed to stop her? What do you want from us?

The Narrator

I want you to succeed. You'll find a way. You're the only one who can.

“No pressure or anything,” Tabitha rolled her eyes.

“Gracias, papá,” Quiet sighed. Then tore his eyes away from the screen as he felt the weight of many stares. Gonzalo included, because what the fuck.

“Ew, no,” Connie wrinkled his nose, before brightening, “On second thought, He would hate that...”

“Don’t say that again,” Cain said.

“You deserve so much better than that,” Paco said.

Damiana had stopped too, her eyes filled with... something. It better not be pity or Gonchi would snap.

“What did he say?” Ava whispered to Gonchi.

“Nothing important,” Gonchi answered. Considering what Quiet told them, the Narrator was dead, so, out of sight out of mind. That was why thinking too much was a bad thing, the thoughts could twist on themselves.

“Okay, show us what you got!” Ava grinned, beautiful and fierce like only she could be.

They saw the cabin again, the same dialogue from the Narrator, something about how the Princess was too direct for lying and cheating — points in her favor if it wasn’t for how utterly impersonal everything else was — and then, the cabin itself.

The Narrator

The interior of the cabin is plain, the smooth wood of the walls almost featureless. The only furniture of note is a lone table, knocked on its side in the corner of the room. A pristine blade stands between you and the open, inviting basement doorway. The blade is your implement. You’ll need it if you want to do this right.

Gonchi could see the appeal in not having decorations or anything, but this was a bit much. Or was it a bit too little?

“Inviting us to run away, more like,” Ave muttered.

“Clara, why?” Ava had to ask, “I expected something with a little more personality.”

Clara reared up and off the floor, “I had to make do with what I had- and the door was unnecessary, you know I can go through those.”

“Enough about the door, what about the eyes on the windows?!” Tabi pointed jerkily.

Paco nodded in — Gonchi was surprised to note — relief. “You see them too?”

“I did too.” Quiet added.

“And you never bothered to tell me?!”

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to talk through an options menu, Paco?!”

“Okay, what do we do?” Damiana interrupted, looking around the room. Puzzled glances answered her.

“You’re the decider, you choose,” Tabi reminded her.

Dami shook her head a bit wildly, “I know that! But those three have gone through this already, and I want to do this right. I’m the decider now, so you’re my responsibility.”

Voice of the Paranoid

Hold on. What happened to the door? There was a door here last time.

Voice of the Hero

It's just an empty frame...

Voice of the Paranoid

She's already gotten out, hasn't she? And she's ready for us. She's been waiting. Can't you feel her eyes on us?

Clara crowed, “This is gold, I haven’t even done anything yet!”

“Can you stop that?” Tabi snapped. “It’s not funny!”

“But it is! It’s too easy!”

“Stop being so mean!” Dami snapped in turn, faltering in surprise at her own boldness. “I mean... you’re scaring him. On purpose. Why?”

Clara looked at her like she didn’t know the way the world worked. “He’s doing everything himself.”

The Narrator

I'm going to need all of you to pull yourselves together. The Princess has not already gotten out, but if you keep getting stuck in your head like this, you're going to struggle to get the job done. So deep breath in, deep breath out. Your task awaits, and only you can do it.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but, listen to him, you’re about to hyperventilate. Inhale, exhale.” Skeptic instructed.

“Easy for you to say!” Paco snapped. “You weren’t there!”

“Wish I was.”

Even if Paco looked everywhere but the screen, Gonchi wasn’t sure it would work. Bullies often read someone ignoring them as fear. They were usually right, too. If there was one thing nobody could afford to show, it was fear.

- This whole cabin is different than remember it

Voice of the Hero

Very different.

Voice of the Paranoid

I'm not the only one who sees her in the window, right? She knows that we're here.

The Narrator

Calm down. Maybe the three of you just *think* everything is different because you haven't been here before. Enough of this past-life nonsense. You haven't died, and you certainly haven't been killed by the Princess. So focus up. A lot's riding on this.

"It's not that much different, though?" Winnie said. "Door's gone and the table's overturned, that's it."

"And the eyes." Paco felt the need to say, like that hadn't been very clear to every one of them.

With that, and the mirror, done, Dami had run out of choices but the one she had clearly avoided.

"Honestly, Dami... you should take it, I think," Tabi chimed in.

"You have to defend yourself!" Ciro agreed. "She made us not function just by being near her, who's to say she won't do the same to the world? You see a tragedy, I see two birds and a rock."

"Maybe she doesn't have that there," Dami argued, "She's never done anything like that here. Right?" she turned to Clara.

"Right."

"There always should be a challenge," Thelka said instead. "Take it."

Dami stared at them. Up until Borja noticed and pointed at himself.

"Yes, you." Dami clarified, fiddling with a stray thread of her dress.

Borja stared like a deer in the headlights. Swallowed. Glanced up at Thelka. "Take it."

"Now tell me how you really feel, please," Dami asked.

Another glance up. A nod of approval. Borja nodded to himself, "I don't think you should."

"Why not?" Skeptic asked instead.

"Clara was mad because she was left there, anyone would be mad. Anyone would be hurt."

"Time to stop talking, birdie." Clara interrupted. Borja's mouth snapped shut.

“No, keep talking,” Thelka said instead, eyes narrowing.

Like that, Borja kept going, “If you went with the blade, she’d still think you’d hurt her. Buried pain is still pain.”

Cain exhaled harshly. “Frozen things don’t move.”

“What’s the point of living if you can’t feel things, Frosty?” Gonchi felt the need, for the first time, to defend Borja.

“More tea?” Oli came back to the room, getting to work on serving it immediately. He even served another cup to Borja. As he passed Damiana, he spoke.

“I’m sure Paquito would feel a lot less scared if he had something to defend himself with,” his voice was smooth and precise and insinuating, rather like the slugs Gonchi killed in the backyard the day before.

Damiana glanced back at him.

- [Take the blade.].

“Good.” Nando said.

Paco sighed, “Thank you.”

The Narrator

You reach down and pick the blade up off the floor. It would be difficult to slay the Princess and save the world without a weapon.

Voice of the Paranoid

Good. Steel can't lie to us.

Voice of the Hero

Is it gonna be enough, though? Couldn't you have given us something else? Something, I don't know, better than a knife? Can we have a bomb?

Winnie couldn’t help it— she laughed. Tabi cracked a grin. Ciro snorted gleefully as Connie gave Nando a pat on the back.

“I take it back, that’s even worse,” Razor pouted.

“Not a fan of chaos and destruction?” Winnie grinned.

“Not that kind of chaos and destruction!”

“I don’t think a bomb would work,” Grace leaned closer to Nando. “Clara was flickering there, so she can’t very... what’s the word...?”

“Corporeal?” Skeptic said.

“Fleshy?” Cain asked.

“Solid?” Oli ventured.

The Narrator

The blade is the only thing you need to finish your task. You're more than capable of pulling this off so long as you don't lose faith in yourself.

Voice of the Paranoid

Those are the words of someone who knows He's sending us to our death...

Tabi frowned, jotting down something else and pointing it out to Skeptic. He laughed a derisive laugh.

“Maybe it can work!” Dami brightened. “Maybe if we’re confident-”

“That’s not how real life works, kid.” Skeptic interrupted. “Belief won’t help much in this case.”

“And what do you know?” Tabi defended her sister, “We’re up against someone who can kill just by being near us.”

“There has to be some sort of logic to how everything works!”

“If you aren’t confident then you lost half the battle!” Ava said.

The Narrator

You cross over the threshold, and onto a series of isolated steps suspended in darkness.

Voice of the Paranoid

More eyes, too. You never mention the eyes.

“Why, though? Why would He omit something like that?” Tabi asked.

The Narrator

The air seeping up from below reminds you of fresh lightning and static, as if you're descending into a place that isn't meant for a creature of flesh and blood. If the Princess lives here, slaying her would probably be doing her a favor. Her cruel and playful voice prances up the stairs.

“Prances?” Ava snorted. “Like a deer?”

I didn't think you'd come back. We're going to have a lot of fun, you and I.

Voice of the Hero

Okay. We need a game plan. Last time we were here, just being close to her was enough to kill us.

“You’re planning now?” Skeptic asked, amazed. “What happened to you when we met?”

“I wasn’t that much of an idiot,” Nando exclaimed.

- (Explore) How hard is it to throw a knife?
- I’m going to talk to her.
- We don’t need a plan. I’m just going to kill her. Mr. Narrator seems to think I can do it. I don’t know why you’re all being such pessimists right now.
- [Step off into the void between the stairs.]
- [Continue down the stairs in silence.]

Hesitantly, Dami picked the option to throw the knife.

“...What would’ve happened if you stepped into the void?” Tabi asked, not even reacting at the multitude of incredulous stares sent her way, “I’m curious.”

“We wouldn’t be able to,” Nando answered, lips slightly twitching.

Voice of the Hero

It can’t be *that* hard.

Voice of the Paranoid

But then we’d lose our weapon. We’d have to make it count. Otherwise she’d be furious and we’d be defenseless. If a knife is enough to even do anything against something like her in the first place...

“This is why you needed me there,” Connie half crouched where he sat, “You know I never miss!”

“Are you out of your mind?” Borja said, “She’s not solid, what do you think would happen if you tried that?”

The Narrator

As you emerge, you find yourself between two loose rows of white wooden planks, suspended in nothingness. A smattering of cobblestones, visible against the inky black of the basement, mark where the floor should be, forming vague pathways. At what seems to be the end of the room, they diverge in opposite directions. Left and right.

“What am I looking at?” Sme- okay, fine, Felipe wondered, tilting his head.

“This isn’t a basement,” Winnie pointed out. “There’s no edges. It’s just dark. Again.”

It wasn't just the screen. The room was darker than it had any right to be; the light didn't seem able to reach the corners, as if the shadows had a life of their own, the screen the one truly bright spot in the room...

"The planks aren't big enough to hide behind. Crouching low won't help either." Ave was muttering.

Voice of the Paranoid

She could be anywhere. And there's nowhere for us to hide. We're completely exposed.

Ave and Paco exchanged a glance, a moment of thought exchange. They could be very similar, in some ways.

Voice of the Hero

Are you really not going to comment on how weird this place is?

The Narrator

No, I'm not. Somebody needs to be the voice of reason here, and it certainly isn't you.

Voice of the Hero

Excuse me? I'm being incredibly reasonable. You're the one who's just matter-of-factly describing whatever the hell we're looking at like it's an ordinary basement.

"Nevermind, it doesn't matter if I'm not there, kid's saying everything I would say," Skeptic grinned.

"We're the same age," Nando frowned.

"Not physically, we're not!"

"How do you think I feel about that?" Quiet said, voice wavering ever-so-slightly.

Voice of the Paranoid

We're going to die down here. I don't want to die again.

The Narrator

Please stop saying that. You're only going to make things worse. Just pick a direction and start moving.

I wouldn't give it too much thought, if I were you. It doesn't really matter, because either way you go, I'm going to find you.

Beast's chest rumbled with laughter, "Someone likes to play with her food."

Connie snickered nervously, "Then we just have to keep her busy."

“Until she gets bored of us, then we die?” Ave shot back.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

Dami took a deep breath. Straightened her back. “I’ve made up my mind. We’re not going to die.”

“How are you so sure?” Paco interrupted, eyes somehow wider. “How can you be so certain?”

“I’m not, I’m asking you to trust me.” She looked at the options menu about the directions. “Where did you guys go?”

“Right, I’m pretty sure,” Nando answered.

“Then we’re going left.”

Gonchi had to laugh at the image that greeted them as the one on the screen went left. The drawing was more of a white blob suspended in the air, with huge eyes and a black something emerging from it.

There you are! I told you I was going to find you.

The screen changed to a flickering version of Clara, cracked mask and all. The cuts on her dress resembling tentacles.

The Narrator

As the Princess approaches, your legs suddenly go numb. Your arms quickly follow.

Voice of the Hero

This is it, isn't it?

“What the-? Already?!” Ava said. Her jaw was set, lips trembling; she was furious as much as terrified, and in that moment Gonchi adored her, would have done anything for her.

The Clara on the screen went even closer, wide eyes staring and mad.

And you brought your little knife with you again. Cute.

Voice of the Paranoid

There has to be a way out of this. Think. Think!

“Run away?” Ave suggested in a little whisper.

The Narrator

What did you do? Pull yourself together, she isn't supposed to be like this.

“Nothing!” Quiet blurted out, more immersed on the screen than Gonchi had thought. Well obviously, he thought, it was nothing Quiet himself had done. Who would have thought being scared of the princess would turn her into something like that?

I wonder how many times I'll get to play with you before you break.

“Seriously, just run away.”

The room was suddenly very warm, very quick, and Gonzalo felt the familiar burning of rage. The Witch had been different, equal opportunities, a balanced chapter. This one was a bully, delighting in making them scared, not even giving them the chance to fight back. Beyond unfair, as Ciro would put it.

His skin should've been boiling, bubbling into welts and sloughing off, freeing him from the body so he could do something. Except all it did was itch and burn. *Break her hurt her make her bleed make her suffer they'd taken so much from all of them now he wanted to take something back how dare she how dare she HOWDARESHE*

(PAIN)

Gonzalo shuddered for a moment, before realizing he'd been holding Quiet's thread in a vice-like grip. He adjusted his grip as quickly as possible, trying to make him see- he didn't mean to- It was an accident-

After a few entirely too long moments, he heard Quiet answering back.

(Relief) (Confusion) *You were angry.*

Gonzalo didn't like feeling guilty, it was not pleasant at all, but he still sent it Quiet's way:

(Remorse) (Concern) *Not at you. I'm sorry. You okay?*

(Confusion) (Trepidation) *You were angry. You're supposed to hurt me. Why aren't you?*

For the first time since he gained awareness, he wanted to kill something and make it stay dead. As soon as they went back home he'd confront Quiet about it. What did that mean? Who had taught him that?

He had barely noticed the room being plunged into darkness as the screen went black, some of them flinching at the loud burst of static.

The Narrator

Your vision cuts out as your blood begins to coagulate. It's as if every part of your being is coming to a lurching halt.

“Clara please,” Dami turned to the star of the show, eyes wide, “Please move away.”

"You look so *tired*, Dami," was the only thing Clara said.

It was amazing how much "tired" sounded like "weak." And "helpless."

“La concha de tu puta madre mal cogida, in what way is this fair?!” Ciro grit his teeth, echoing what Gonchi himself was thinking.

“Everything goes dark and we die?” Tabi ventured.

Voice of the Paranoid

Heart. Lungs. Liver. Nerves. Heart. Lungs. Liver. Nerves.

Right, Paco’s little chant to calm himself down. He should have expected it to be born somewhere like the situation on the screen.

Skeptic grit his teeth. “Paco, could you stop? I’m trying to think!”

The Narrator

Your lungs pull in a desperate gulp of air as your eyes shoot back open.

Voice of the Hero

What are you doing?

Voice of the Paranoid

I’m working. Do you want this body to function, or do you want—

The Narrator

And then experience stops once more as your body reapproaches death.

Voice of the Hero

Okay, whatever you were doing, please just start doing it again.

“...wait a moment. Are you keeping them alive?” Winnie turned away from the screen, facing Paco with eyes as wide as his.

"Is that it?" Clara wasn't impressed. "And for how long were you planning on keeping that up?"

"Forever if I have to." Paco said, and Gonchi had to admire his commitment.

Voice of the Paranoid

Are you sure about that? Are you sure that's what you want, or do you want to interrupt me some more?

Maybe channelling his rage into the chant wasn’t the most productive of things, but Gonchi needed something to do that didn’t involve him potentially accidentally crushing Quiet’s

threads again. Ava followed.

Ciro started clapping. So did Tabi, Connie, Nando with some kind of respect.

“You’re incredible!” Dami smiled at Paco,

Ave had turned to Paco, eyes wide with horror.

The Narrator

You have seconds left.

Voice of the Hero

Yes, I'm sure!

Voice of the Paranoid

Heart. Lungs. Liver. Nerves. Heart...

“...are you... overriding her thing with your own overriding?” Skeptic tried to understand.

“What are you doing?” Ave finally found his voice, barely, “What are you doing to the body?!”

Confusion in Paco’s eyes. “I’m making it function? I just explained it! We just have to push through the pain and get her!”

Ave shook his head wildly, “You can’t just shrug off organ failure. The body is too tired, too hurt. It’s telling you to lie down and rest.”

“It can rest after we’re out of danger!” Paco insisted.

“All you’re doing is killing it slower and more painfully.”

“You’re thinking too much, fledgling,” Beast interrupted, and Gonchi swore he could hear the twins’ hearts skip a beat simultaneously, “We evolved to catch you, you evolved to avoid us in any way necessary.”

Right. Gonzalo hated her too.

The Narrator

Again, your eyes shoot open as you gasp for breath.

Can't decide what you want to do, can you? Oh, well. Standing there gasping like a fish is more fun than dead, even if you look ridiculous.

“Why are you being so mean?!” Dami tried to understand, looking at the screen where the Princess pulled back, hands on her hips.

“My dear,” Felipe said, speaking for the first time in a while, “If I may relieve you of the burden you’ve chosen to carry...”

“You may not,” Dami said resolutely, “But thanks for offering.”

Voice of the Hero

She isn't attacking us. Why?

The Narrator

The 'why' doesn't matter. She's already proven her ill intent. Don't lose sight of your mission. Your weapon is still in your hands. Strike at her and end this before it's too late.

- (Explore) "Why won't you finish me off?"
- (Explore) "What good am I to you alive? What do you want from me?"
- (Explore) "What happened after you killed me last time?"
- (Explore) "I was sent here to stop you from destroying the world. I can't just let you leave."
- (Explore) "You're a lunatic. You know that, right?"
- (Explore) "If you want to work together, can you at least turn off this whole organs-shutting-down situation?"
- (Explore) "How about I just kill you instead?"
- (Explore) "We don't have to be enemies. We can work together. We can be friends, even."
- "I'm not doing any of this. I'm not helping you leave, and I'm not going to try and kill you, so do your worst." [Toss the blade and remain with your Nightmare.]
- "Okay, let's get out of here." [[Leave together.]
- "Fine, you win. I'll let you leave." [Leave together.]
- [Run.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

“Really? I want action!” Razor pouted.

“Dami, please let me-” Tabi tried, weakly reaching for the mouse but not pressing when Dami shook her head.

“Okay, Hero wanted to know why she’s not attacking...”

- (Explore) "Why won't you finish me off?"

Because I don't want to. And even if I did, I don't have to. Look at the way you're struggling to stay alive. It's taking everything you have to keep your heart pumping right now. And I'm enjoying the show.

“Thanks for that, by the way,” Clara told Paco, and it wasn’t hard to imagine a grin from ear to ear behind the mask. It made Gonchi want to punch her, crack that mask into little pieces, make her feel even a fraction of the fear the others were experiencing.

He would do it. Just not now. If anything, he had learned restraint those few months.

His fingers still twitched when the princess on the screen was close. Very close.

The Narrator

The Princess leans forward, bringing her masked-lips close to your ear.

If I want to see you gone, all I need to do is break your concentration.

Voice of the Paranoid

HEART. LUNGS. LIVER. NERVES.

He should have been there. He could have helped Paco, he was sure, they both were all about the body, about keeping it healthy.

Ciro wavered in place, trembling with rage, but neither of them could do anything, and that was infuriating.

Oli grinned, very nervously, “You sure are good with negotiations.”

Clara blinked, “Thank you!”

The Narrator

She slowly runs her velvet glove across the base of your neck. It feels like static and then—

Voice of the Paranoid

Shit shit shit, make her stop!

Voice of the Hero

Hey! Snap out of it!

Voice of the Paranoid

Okay. Deep breath. Deep breath. We're fine. Heart. Lungs. Liver. Nerves. Heart...

“I see someone is a gloves g-” Connie shut his mouth as he dodged both a pillow and a slap to the back of his neck, courtesy of Fernando. “I was trying to lighten the mood!”

“Not the time!” Nando retorted.

Faintly, Gonchi noticed the chant in the background was a lot faster.

The Narrator

—you're back.

One moment, and then you're gone. Just. Like. That. Ah, and there's the fear.

The Narrator

She pulls away.

But that wouldn't be very fun, now would it? I've already done that.

“Why are you being so cruel? We’ve done nothing!” Dami said.

Clara sighed, crossing her arms, “Dami, they betrayed me and left me to die, I’m allowed to have some fun. You would’ve done the same!”

“Uh, I can answer that,” Winnie said, “No she wouldn’t! That's psychotic!”

“What happened after the decider got killed, ask her that,” Tabi interrupted, looking at her twin with-

Was that an attempt at puppy dog eyes?

- (Explore) "What happened after you killed me last time?"

I tried to leave while you suffocated, but that stupid cabin wouldn't let me. So I started to drag your body out with me and then... Well, you died before I could get to the door. And then I was here, and now you're here too. I don't think I can leave without you, and dead doesn't count. And as much as I love what we have going on, I have bigger plans than tormenting one poor little creature forever. I want to leave.

“Okay. Okay. So it was instantaneous to you.” Tabi breathed a few times before going back to her notebook, half keeping an eye on Dami.

“Another option appeared? You’re working overtime, Choicemaker,” Ava grinned at Quiet.

- (Explore) "If you need me alive, then why did you threaten me on the stairs? Why didn't you try being nice to me?"

I am being nice. You're alive, aren't you?

“You’re not being nice at all! We didn’t even know you had this death aura thing!” Tabi whipped around to glare at her.

And you died of fright as soon as you saw me last time. I didn't think keeping you alive was an option. But it looks like that's not a problem anymore. At least not for me! You seem miserable.

Paco was looking at Clara, not with fear as Gonchi had expected, but with unadulterated hatred.

Dami was starting to panic, “Um, what about destroying the world..?”

- (Explore) "I was sent here to stop you from destroying the world. I can't just let you leave."

I know! You told me last time. 'Destroy' is such an unenlightened way of putting it. So sudden. So violent. So little nuance. I'm not going to destroy the world, but I am going to hold it in my hands and squeeze it. I'm going to make it afraid, just like I've made you afraid.

The fact the Princess on the screen was twirling in the air as she said that, like nothing in the world mattered...

"Why would you do that?" Dami turned horrified eyes to her, "The world is beautiful!"

"It is still in need of alterations," Thelka cut in smoothly, as if reassuring a panicking child, "Fear and suffering is necessary to appreciate the good things."

"That doesn't mean it's good for someone to spread fear around," Tabi took over.

"The cabin obviously isn't good for anyone," Felipe interrupted, "I'm sure she must have thought that while she was trapped, but she hasn't tried to end the world all this time! Surely that has to count!"

Clara blinked as if in a daze, "I guess I must have forgotten. It's very fuzzy."

Felipe's smile slid right off his face.

"You won't be doing that," Plethora said, with some weight behind it.

The world needs fear, doesn't it? Every terror I'd bring would make the good times so much better. I'm practically doing a public good! So what harm is there really in letting me out?

"Nobody wants to live in a cage," Beast said. She yawned hugely, showing all her fangs.

"You knew what she wanted to do and STILL you let her out?" Ciro said, incredulous. Quiet flinched very slightly.

- (Explore) "People will die if you do to them what you've done to me."

But everybody dies eventually! They're all full of wet, writhing things and in the end, each and every one of them gets unwound! And then those things get to become a new everybody, just to come apart all over again.

Thelka nodded, as though it made perfect sense to her.

Gonchi was finding there were a lot of people there deserving of his hate. That one too, how could she enslave Borja somehow and relish in that so blatantly - the way he asked for her permission to speak...

He didn't know how much more he could take.

All I want is to be there for it! I want to watch it happen. And maybe do a little unwinding myself. Is that really so much to ask?

“How’s that unwinding going for you?” Razor asked. “Was that literal? Because I could help after teaching Dami how to stab.”

Ciro choked on his own outrage.

“It’s been wonderful!” Clara, that monster in barely-humanish-skin smiled, “Having downtime really brings things into perspective. Makes you think on what to do next more carefully.”

- (Explore) "And if I let you out? What then? Do we go our separate ways?"

Oh, no, definitely not. If you're what I need to leave this place, chances are you're pretty useful. I think I'll keep you right by my side. A little good luck charm, to make sure I stay free. Don't worry, I'll make sure to take good care of you. I promise.

Quiet *whimpered*. Nando positioned himself so Clara wouldn’t see him as easily, Grace doing the same thing, not that her translucence helped with much. Paco could be barely seen beneath the blanket.

Ave *screamed*. It was a howl of rage too wild for an animal, let alone a human being, and it cut through the dimly lit room like a razor. It was a warning and it was a promise.

And Gonchi found himself standing up between the group and her, Ava by his side, “Over my dead body.”

“Not that, please,” one of the ones behind him said, he couldn’t be too sure who.

“Settle down,” Plethora sighed, “These are our guests, aren’t they?”

Dami nodded, face pale, “Y-yes! So they have to go back if they want to!”

Clara hadn’t made a move, but Gonchi wasn’t convinced. Both him and his wife settled down right where they were, none of them taking their eyes off of her. Ciro materialized at their side.

“Alright, the marriage is on,” Oli smiled, and maybe it was the lighting, but he seemed to have turned completely white.

That took Clara’s attention away from them. She giggled. *Giggled*.

- (Explore) "Being around you is agony. I'm not going to stick around."

“Paco can’t take it!” Dami gestured at the screen desperately. As if she needed to justify herself. As if anyone that mattered would think any less of her. This wasn't enjoyable for them, and they couldn't move, so even if it wasn't the bravest option Gonzalo couldn't say anything against that.

We both know that you don't have a say here. So you should just look on the bright side. I don't know what the bright side is for you, but I'm positive you can find it if you look hard enough.

“Why?” Dami asked, lip trembling, looking so unlike his Ava Gonzalo couldn't wrap his head around the fact they both shared similarities at all. “Wouldn't it be better that they chose it of their own accord?”

“It would be more significant,” Thelka agreed, looking at Clara as though to reproach her.

Connie looked at the new option that appeared and couldn't hold on a slightly hysterical laugh, “Guess I'll die?!”

- (Explore) "I'll just die then."

And then we'll wind up right back where we started. Round and round we'll go! I wonder what will be different next time. Maybe you'll actually be able to move a limb. Who knows! But I'm always going to win.

Maybe they'd be able to move an arm, that way they could shatter that mask like Gonchi had wanted to do from the beginning. They had to get out of there somehow.

“Don't pick that option,” Oli blurted out.

Gonchi quickly read it. 'Are you sure about that? Give it enough tries and I'm bound to win eventually. And maybe you don't get to come back like I do.'

“I don't want to pick that either,” Dami agreed, and Gonchi wondered why, if they made her angry maybe she would slip up and they could win.

“Then choose,” Cain said.

Dami turned to him fully, and there was something... incredibly fragile in her posture. “Huh?”

“If you don't want to keep dragging this on forever, you have to choose one of the non-Explore options.”

- "I'm not doing any of this. I'm not helping you leave, and I'm not going to try and kill you, so do your worst." [Toss the blade and remain with your Nightmare.]
- "Okay, let's get out of here." [[Leave together.]
- "Fine, you win. I'll let you leave." [Leave together.]
- [Run.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

Gonchi was about to punch him too, at this rate. He could swear Cain was enjoying himself.

“I'm very curious to see which will it be.”

Chapter End Notes

Broken - Borja

Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi/Gonzalito

Cold - Caín

Contrarian - Connie

Hunted - Avellano/Ave

Opportunist - Oleander/Oli

Paranoid - Paco/Paquito

Cheated - Ciro

Hero - Fernando/Nando

Smitten - Felipe/Feli

Chapter 11: Face of nothing

Chapter Summary

To my incredible readers: sorry about that last cliffhanger. Well no, not really. JAJAJAJAJA. Seriously though, love you guys.

Dua

Chapter Notes

Was told the names were confusing if they were at the end so here they are, at the beginning!

Broken - Borja
Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi/Gonzalito
Cold - Caín
Contrarian - Connie
Hunted - Avellano/Ave
Opportunist - Oleander/Oli
Paranoid - Paco/Paquito
Cheated - Ciro
Hero - Fernando/Nando
Smitten - Felipe/Feli
Prisoner - Tabi/Tabitha
Damsel - Dami/Damiana
Witch - Winnie/Winifred
Tower - Thelka
Adversary - Ava
Nightmare - Clara
Spectre - Grace
Stranger - Plethora

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Tabitha wanted to stop this from happening, to free her sister from the pain that was sure to follow, but Dami didn't want her to. All she could do was watch and advise. And think of what to do with the information after. Tabi grasped Skeptic's left hand with her gelid right one. Neither could get warm. Secrets stole all the heat from your body.

Her sister wouldn't set the game version of Clara free, of that she was sure. The world was one thing in the abstract, when they'd been locked in basements with only vague ideas of what it meant. Now their list of priorities had shifted drastically. The world had to be saved.

"This won't go well," *Ciro* declared, just as a statement of fact. "Chapter III: Bullshit."

"She will make a good choice. As they say, the future belongs to us, the optimists," *Feli* insisted.

Ciro was not impressed. "I'm going to put that on your tombstone if you keep throwing sugar packet quotes at me."

"I don't think I want to set her free," *Dami* looked everywhere but at Clara. "The you from before wanted to hurt others, and I can't let you do that. I'm not killing you, either."

"You're really not the best with knives," *Ava* chimed in.

"Do your worst" won't make her any less angry. *Paco* can't keep going like that-

"Yes I could," *Paco* countered.

"You shouldn't have to," she answered. "So we need another game plan."

Tabi was so proud of her at that moment, taking into account all options, the pros and the cons. If Clara herself hadn't been in the room, she would push for the option to slay. It was something she never thought she would be pushed to consider.

If someone wasn't remorseful, they wouldn't change their mind at all. And the Clara on the screen wasn't the least bit remorseful, nor did the Clara here. But something was... off.

- [Run.]

Ave sighed, "Good."

The Narrator

You turn and run, doing your best to put one useless leg in front of the other.

You poor, poor thing. Wrong choice.

The Clara on the screen appeared in a blink, mask filling the entire screen, making most of the room startle. Her eyes were wide and bloodshot, maddened.

Dami stiffened, "Wrong choice?"

"Don't you start with that," *Connie* told her, "I'm loving that. Makes both Him and her unhappy. Both of them were being jerks, admit it."

Dami looked away.

Tabi exchanged a glance with Skeptic. A wrong choice in a game that told you outright there were no wrong options was strange. Antithetical to what the first screen told them. Was it just an empty threat or another puzzle piece? Was the 'wrong choice' going to get them answers?

"Says who?!" Ciro seethed, clenching his fists. "This is bullshit, first there's a wrong way of slaying her now there's wrong options?! That's a perfectly good option and fuck whoever said that!"

"Of course there's a good option, letting me out!" Clara shook herself out of her stupor. "I thought that was obvious!"

"That was not a good choice," Beast agreed, pinning him in place with her gaze, "It activated her prey drive."

"What the fuck is a prey drive?!"

The Narrator

You get nowhere before the Princess is in front of you once again.

You're always going to be a coward.

The Narrator

She raises a hand to her mask and pulls it down. You don't get the chance to see what lies beneath before it envelops you.

Well, they could see. And Tabi wished she hadn't been able to.

She had *no face*, no nose, her eyes and mouth held on by something dark, though not blacker than the sheer abyss that surrounded them. Her lipless mouth was pulled on a sick grin, the teeth drawn individually. Her eyes twitched as one tear fell down on the trajectory of what should be a face.

"Que mierda es eso?!" Ciro jolted in place, hand halfway to his face in a defensive gesture.

Paco dove under the blanket, not that Tabi could blame him. By contrast, Ave had straightened to his full height, was it her imagination or was his hair standing on end?

"God, she's ugly." she heard Connie say, very lowly. Not lowly enough.

Clara looked at him, just looked at him, hands stilling from where she'd been trying to get her fingers under the mask. Did she have a face at all? Could she kill them if she wanted to? How could Tabi keep her sister and the others safe, if that happened?

"Aw, don't be sad, Clara!" Razor grinned, "So you don't have that thing called skin. You don't need skin and organs to do stuff!"

Tabi's pen went off the lines of her notebook because what did that mean?

The Narrator

Like a creeping mold, the complete reality of your existence threads it way through your mind. Birth, death, birth again. Decay and bloom. A million stitches from a million microscopic wounds you've inflicted on everyone you've ever met with every muscle you've moved and every word you've ever spoken.

Voice of the Hero

No no no!

Let me out.

Throughout the narration, the image on the screen was of the Princess, the one every girl in the room supposedly changed from (she still didn't understand how that was possible). It was white lines on a black background, it got gradually scribbled out and bent to the side, sketches of mounds of bodies piling up on either side of the screen, their arms and hands limply reaching for nothing at all.

Or for her, perhaps.

Tabi blinked, trying to understand what was happening on the screen.

"A cycle of death and rebirth until a normal soul is made into something new," Thelka reasoned, smiling.

Beast huffed in response, "This is just the natural cycle. An existing thing always leaves a mark."

"Existing makes wounds?" Razor joined, "I've never thought of it like that!"

"I wouldn't describe existence as something hurtful," Felipe argued, "Living means finding good things, finding love, possibility. Not just bloodshed."

"I guess you're right," Beast yawned, so wide Tabi could see it took actual effort for that massive maw to close.

The Narrator

Your existence hurts them.

Let me out!

The Narrator

A lonely soul in a room by itself weeping. It lives for eighty years and then it's gone. And then it's there again.

The screen cut, and then an image of the Princess stood. Her weeping, teary-eyed face brought out of her hands and glanced at the material piling around her. It had been melting

into a lump of flesh, no, aging unnaturally fast, her skin sloughing off her bones. Age to the point of rot.

Dami looked green. Tabi heard Felipe asking if she was okay.

Reincarnation, was that what it meant? The loops? Timeloops were a sort of cycle, but what did that have to do with Clara taking off her mask and yelling?

This she knew: They had been there for months.

This she knew: Clara, Beast, Grace, possibly Winnie weren't human.

This she knew: Clara could do tremendous amount of harm, but she hadn't yet.

The images didn't match up. Did the cold, or the thing In the dark, have something to do with it? Could it have taken something from Clara? The drive, the will of her own? The want to destroy?

That was what it did, hollow them out and steal away pieces of them for itself. It could have taken Dami away, taken something of her sister and never give it back. Would Tabi have noticed? Would Tabi notice if she had changed?

That didn't matter, as soon as this stopped she would pack her bags, take her sister and run-

A rushing sound, the kind that swept away anything else.

...what had she been thinking about, again? The images didn't match up, that was it.

Let. Me. Out!

The Narrator

A reprieve. A good life. Love, children, a steady career. Recognition from your peers. Here one moment, gone the next. The worms have found their orifices.

LET. ME. OUT!

Sketched silhouettes of people surrounded the image of the Princess, who looked happier and happier as more 'people' crowd around her, even downright manic. Tabi was always uncomfortable with such extreme, unhealthy grins. There was something about them that set her on edge. On the screen, the Princess' teeth turned black as the grin reached her widest point.

She couldn't help but feel a stab of pity when the Narrator said 'gone the next' and the Princess wept, still smiling.

All that went out of the window when 'the worms have found their orifices' meant an actual image of a grave, the Princess inside it, being completely consumed by worms.

Winnie made a sound of disgust and Dami took one hand to her face to retch. "...I'm okay, I'm okay. I can keep going."

The Narrator

Diagnosis. It forgets everything it is. Anger. Rage. Distance. Poverty. The lonely soul is lonely again. Love turns to mockery. It dies. It is reborn. Worse. Lonelier.

LET ME OUT!

The image of the Princess was surrounded by images of random items and those sketched 'people'. Gradually, the people disappeared as the objects and image of the Princess melted into flesh once more.

"What is with this and melting people?" Ava shuddered in disgust.

On the screen, the Princess stood, alone, in an empty void. Identical to the beginning, identically scratched.

The Narrator

The saccharine scent of the long-dead corpses you've left unburied. The marriages you've broken. The children you've orphaned.

Voice of the Hero

No no no no no! What- what's happening to us?!

Borja's breath hitched. "The water..."

Tabi looked to the side as Skeptic stiffened. His focus abruptly disappeared, to be replaced by burning, fearful *recognition*. But of what? Was he afraid of the water?

Most of the other boys looked uncomfortable too. That was something to note.

LET ME OUT!

The Narrator

This is all too much. I... can't keep going.

Connie laughed nervously, "Small victories, huh, boys?"

Voice of the Paranoid

You can't keep going? What are you talking about?

But he doesn't respond.

Oops... I think I broke you. I'll see you soon! You'll know what to do.

Your body is dead, but you live on.

“What does that mean?!” Winnie leaned back, disturbed.

Tabi wanted to know too, but that was interrupted by the chapter III screen.

...Which then showed also a Chapter IV. And a V... 6th, 8th.... she counted up till 34 until the titles completely filled the screen in white. Then text appeared in black: The Moment Of Clarity.

Which completely upended everything Tabi thought she knew about the game. She had counted more than thirty chapters! What did that mean? How long could a loop be?

“No, no, what did I do..?” Dami whispered.

On the screen, there were supposed to be woods. What was there didn't seem like woods at all. Structures resembling trees with their roots exposed, cobblestones suspended in midair in lieu of a path. No ground to speak of, even the stars were sparse there.

The Narrator

You're on a path in the—

Voice of the Paranoid

Shit! Shit! What— what the hell was that?! Who are we? What are we doing?!

Voice of the Broken

There was a Princess, I think. It's all so fuzzy. It hurts when I try to remember.

Thelka did not speak, but there was a glimpse of something dark and furious as she straightened to her full height. Realization flickered with cold certainty, the shadow of candle flames within grey eyes. Pale mist filled the previous dark grey of her eyes, the distinct thrum of power electrifying the air.

Even if it was merely the fraction of an echo... Tabi could not shake the chill of fear that scratched a finger up her spine. From her experiences with the thing in the dark, Gods knew only to take. And Thelka surely liked to talk about being one too.

“I'm so sorry,” Dami whispered to the room at large, her face white. She shook her head, and Tabi could feel the effort it took for her to talk about anything else. ““Broken”? That's not a nice name. Why did all of you get mean names?”

“It is a good name,” Thelka raised an eyebrow, “I gave it to him.”

“That's not true, the Decider named us!” Skeptic didn't even look up from his notes, his hand squeezing Tabi's own.

“Not me,” Borja said.

The Narrator

You shouldn't know about the Princess. At least not until I... You've already been here, haven't you?

Voice of the Hero

I guess? It feels so long ago. Almost like we've never left.

Voice of the Broken

We have to let her out.

Ciro rolled his eyes, "Borja just hatched and he's already sick of life."

"I didn't say that."

"What part of 'squeezing the world' didn't you understand?!"

The Narrator

No, that's the opposite of what you're here to do. You have to slay her.

Voice of the Paranoid

Slay... we decided not to do that, didn't we?

Voice of the Opportunist

Yeah, we're supposed to let her out. It's really the only way this works out for us, if you think about it. She's the one with power here. Nobody else can do much of anything.

"Why are you here?!" Tabi whirled around to point accusingly at Oli, coming back with — what else? — more tea.

"We obviously need some sort of bargaining power — here, it's for the nerves —, I don't know why Borja is here too." Oli took his time answering, handing Dami a mug with different colored tea than the other. Begrudgingly, Tabi had to admire the gesture. Now that she really looked at her sister, she didn't look well.

"Hey, hold on, Dami doesn't have to be the Decider anymore, right?" Winnie seemed to have picked up on that too. "The chapter changed."

"There's been too many chapters between this one and the last one, let her have it if she feels up for it," Ava said.

Voice of the Stubborn

No, we were supposed to keep her trapped there forever... I think.

"I'm there too?" Gonchi blinked.

Ava smiled, “Stubborn, huh? It suits you.”

“You sound... tired.” Tabi said, making Ava’s smile dip into a frown.

Voice of the Cold

We're supposed to be unfeeling. How many times do I have to tell you to snuff out your heart?

Immediately, Borja picked up a pillow, glanced fleetingly at Thelka, then threw it at Cain with all his strength. He was prepared, this time, and the pillow hit him in the raised elbow. He put it behind his head.

“To compare the very thing that gives us life to something as fleeting as a candle...” Felipe seethed.

“It’s just as easy.” Cain answered, staring intently at the screen. Cold... Tabi couldn’t say it didn’t fit, considering what she had seen from him so far.

Voice of the Hunted

We can't be unfeeling. Not when there's so much fear everywhere.

Beast chuckled under her breath.

Voice of the Contrarian

There's nothing for us to do. We've already tried everything.

“Oh,” Dami smiled tremulously, “Connie. I see now.”

Connie smiled back, it didn’t seem to reach his eyes, “That’s me.”

Voice of the Smitten

We love her. So we have to set her free.

Voice of the Skeptic

Can we love something that hates us? Can we love something that hurts us?

Voice of the Smitten

To be given an ounce of kindness from something so cruel would be more pure than any other love.

“No, no that’s not how it works,” Dami stole Tabi’s answer before she could formulate it. “Someone who loves you doesn’t hurt you. Love should be kind.”

Felipe went to speak. Closed his mouth. Opened it again. “My other self must have meant, love can change people! And if we’re nice to her, she should change too.”

“Why aren’t you...?” Whatever Dami was going to say, it died in her lips.

Tabi, for her part, was confused. What could have possibly happened to make Smitten appear? What sort of thing-?

A possible answer appeared in her mind. Her thoughts illuminated it. Then she chose to not acknowledge it at all.

Very carefully not looking at it.

Voice of the Cheated

Why are there so many of us? There aren't supposed to be so many of us.

The Narrator

This is bad. You need to get a grip. What did you let happen? How many times have you been here?

Skeptic didn’t even look up, writing almost feverishly. "We went through a lot of chapters. It was like before, Ciro, when we die, a new one of us comes in."

“I didn’t say that!” the actual Ciro protested. Skeptic didn’t answer him. “Hello?”

Tabi could barely find her own voice when she saw the options menu appear. “Explore, Dami. We... we always have to look for the info.”

- '(Explore) "I think they're all... wrong."
- '(Explore) "That's a good question. How many times have you all been here?"

Voice of the Skeptic

Many many many many times.

“That’s not a number,” Skeptic muttered under his breath.

Voice of the Paranoid

It feels like we've been here forever, but it also feels like we've barely been here at all.

Voice of the Broken

It doesn't matter.

Cain nodded at that.

Voice of the Opportunist

Yes. We just have to do what she says. And then everything will be fine.

The Narrator

It won't.

Voice of the Opportunist

It will be for us. She said so.

Ave blinked. "What's wrong with you, culebra?"

"Oli, you know how to spot liars," Grace said-- when had she wrapped herself around Quiet so completely? "That one's obvious."

"I know," Oli blanched, "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Giving up power to a superior, an utter lack of scheming, blind trust in the word of someone who's proven to be untrustworthy. That was not the Oleander Tabi had seen in his own route, not the Oleander Tabi had seen in flesh and blood.

The Narrator

You're part of everything. If things aren't fine for everything, they won't be fine for you.

Voice of the Contrarian

There's no difference between Fine and Not Fine. It just goes on and on.

Connie gasped, going completely still.

Cain nodded, giving Connie a smile. It made his features look off. "You're starting to understand."

"That is *not* me."

"Isn't it?"

- '(Explore) "I think they're all... wrong."
- (Explore) "But that doesn't make sense. I only remember being here twice before this, and some of you don't seem to remember being here at all. Was I here those other times? Did someone else make the decisions?"

Voice of the Contrarian

What does here even mean, if you really think about it?

"I suppose imitation is the sincerest form of flattery..." Cain said leadingly.

"Shut up! *Shut UP!*" Connie said, half furious half terrified. He would have stood if not for Winnie pushing him down by the shoulder.

Voice of the Stubborn

Shut up. You were here.

Voice of the Broken

Every single time.

Voice of the Opportunist

You did your best, really. There's just a pecking order.

Voice of the Smitten

And our cruel and beautiful goddess sits atop it, right where she's always belonged.

Gonchi was recognizable enough, still. Tired, but not downtrodden. Still had some kind of spark to him. Oli was being genuinely kind, it seemed, something that jarred her.

What was with Smitten and the goddess comparisons? It was a very specific compliment, even when taking into account whatever must have happened until then.

It was very cold in the room. Tabi pressed herself to her sister's side.

Voice of the Hero

You're lucky. What I would give to be able to forget.

Tabi's stomach dropped like a stone. She had expected that line to belong to the one she knew now was previously called Broken. Never before would she have expected Hero, Fernando, to sound so tired.

No, it was more than tiredness, it was resignation.

Cain shifted slightly. Tabi noticed because Dami turned her head to him too. He was looking at some of the group near them. Grace, wrapped around Quiet, murmuring something. Nando, not looking at the screen. Quiet, who did look at the screen very intently.

Voice of the Cold

I've tried to keep them numb, but they're all too soft. A shame, really.

The hand holding Tabi's own was shaking.

Dami turned slightly, "You were helping them?"

Paco spoke up for the first time, hissing, "Help?! How can you call that help?!"

Gonchi nodded, "That's not helpful, we need to feel things!"

"It would be such an empty life, to roam around thinking in such a way!" Felipe assured her.

- (Explore) "If I don't remember what I did, then it couldn't have been me that did it."

The Narrator

Don't think about that too hard. All it will do is weaken your resolve and make it that much harder for you to slay her.

Voice of the Broken

Maybe you're shattered in your own way.

Nando shuddered slightly, "Don't say that."

Voice of the Skeptic

Are you your memories, or are you the one perceiving the present moment?

Voice of the Stubborn

Ugh. Here you go 'philosophizing' again. It never goes anywhere.

Voice of the Contrarian

Yes, this is far from the first time you've asked us about consciousness. 'Who am I?'; 'What am I?'; 'What is 'I'?' Who even cares?

Tabi could see Cain turn his head to Connie, a fluid motion, too fluid, impossibly smooth for the bones and muscle fibers of his body to achieve at that angle. She couldn't see his face from where she was sitting, yet she saw the shadow of his smile on Connie's paling face.

"*You'd care!*" Nando jumped before Cain could start talking, breaking the staring contest. "You were philosophing all the way up to the basement, remember?"

Connie let out a grateful sigh as Cain tilted his head idly in Nando's direction. "We had the same questions going up the stairs. You can't get enough of conversations like this."

Nando's posture straightened, almost leaning forward in his seat, then paused as he tracked the way Cain's neck seemed to crane forward in turn. He settled down and Cain did as well, eerily matching but somehow off. Tabitha noted the way both Connie and Nando shivered simultaneously as Cain's attention drifted from them both, to the figure huddled at Nando's side.

Ave slithered into Tabi's field of view, eyes reflecting the light of the screen eerily. Like Paco, his posture was completely tense, unlike Paco, he was completely focused on Cain.

The Hunted, but even cornered animals can strike if they feel threatened. It was like he was getting ready to pounce, like he was going to attack at the slightest movement.

Tabi hoped he wouldn't. It would spell chaos.

Voice of the Opportunist

They're good questions. Great questions, even. But they don't have any answers.

Voice of the Hunted

And they all just end in quivering torment.

Voice of the Cheated

It doesn't matter what we do. Because we always find her. And if we don't find her, she always finds us.

Voice of the Broken

And then she smashes us into smaller pieces.

“What have you done to them?” Winnie asked, aghast. Was this the same Winnie who said she wouldn’t forgive them yet? Then again, Tabi supposed empathizing and forgiving weren’t the same thing.

Tabi hunched over beside Skeptic, peering at his notebook. He had only been noting the dialogue on what the past few loops were like. Seeing them so worn down must have made a number on him. That was fine, she could do the rest for him. All of them were beyond exhausted, with the attitudes to match. No new ideas, resignation. If that was so, what had they been doing so many chapters?

Was it a refusal to let her out really all it took for her to be trapped there?

That was... worrying.

Voice of the Cold

If you all just stopped feeling we could have been done with this ages ago.

The Narrator

Your thoughts are far too scattered to reign back in. Your only option is to silence them.

- What if we don't go to the Cabin?"

Voice of the Contrarian

We tried that!~

Tabi couldn’t stop herself from flinching at the singsongy tone. It sounded wrong to her ears. Everything in this situation sounded wrong.

Voice of the Hero

It doesn't work.

Voice of the Smitten

Our heart's always brought us back to her.

Tabi's heart stuttered, imagining Smitten just bringing them all back to Clara over and over and over again...

"Don't you start with that again!" Paco hissed at him. "That was idiotic enough the first time!"

"What first time?" Tabi murmured to Skeptic.

"It *worked* the first time!" Felipe defended himself.

"It was funny, but it didn't work!" Contrarian— Connie, she couldn't mix them up — piped up, halfway there to hiding in his scarf.

"It did for a little while, right, my friend?" Felipe turned to Oli, who froze mid-step.

"Stop, all of you!" Dami's exclamation rang out in the room. She wilted at the attention the stares conveyed. "I don't know why you're being mean to each other in the game, you should be working together to escape, but that doesn't mean you should do the same here! You're friends, aren't you?"

There were more noncommittal mumbled answers that Dami was expecting.

Voice of the Cheated

The deck is stacked.

Voice of the Hunted

So many paths and they're all circles.

- (Explore) "I feel so disjointed. I don't know if I can pull this off. I don't know if I can slay her."

The Narrator

I don't care how you feel. You have to slay her. You have to pull yourself together. You have to snap out of it.

Dami exhaled roughly through her nose. "Why are you being so mean? Don't you care they're hurting?"

"Of course he doesn't, fuck that guy." Paco replied.

Ava snorted, "Didn't know you were so mouthy."

"You'd be surprised," Gonchi said, shoulders slumping slightly in relief.

Voice of the Cold

You're lucky you haven't been stuck here like the rest of them. There's no other way to keep going. You either need to forget, or you need to stop feeling much of anything. They can't do

either.

Voice of the Opportunist

He's not wrong. He's the only smart one left, if you ask me.

Voice of the Broken

He's worse than her.

"I'm sorry, who's the smart one?" to Tabi's relief, Skeptic finally seemed to come out of his notebook-shell.

Borja just nodded at his not-self's words. Thinking about it, only Skeptic seemed to actually like Cain.

But there was something else. A contradiction. The other Voices had said the Decider had been there since the beginning, and there Cold was, insisting that he had only just returned to them.

Forgetting or not feeling much... not feeling was out of the table, and amnesia was on the menu, but why would Cold give that as an option in the first place?

- "The only way out is to do nothing. So nothing I will do." [Stay where you are.]

The Narrator

You do... nothing? You can't just do nothing. You have to do something.

"Yes I can do nothing. They need a break." Dami nodded resolutely.

"And our Choicemaker comes in with more things to do, good." Winnie grinned.

Voice of the Hero

That's... a new one. Huh. Do you think it'll work?

Voice of the Broken

No. Nothing ever works.

Voice of the Opportunist

Boo. You're the worst one.

Tabi desperately tried to muffle her snort with a hand, feeling guilty immediately after. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"It's fine," Borja waved her off, "I don't care what he thinks."

Voice of the Skeptic

He's not the one who got us into this mess.

Voice of the Paranoid

At least I keep you breathing around her.

“That’s the problem,” Ave blurted out.

Again, Paco emerged from the blanket, “What do you mean, I’m keeping all of them alive!”

“Barely. You don’t understand your limits.” Ave said, stern and tense.

“You say that to me all the time and I’m fine,” Gonchi interrupted.

“That isn’t the same!”

Voice of the Opportunist

See? That's why the sad one's the worst. The jumpy one tries.

Dami smiled slightly, nodding. She stood up straighter in her seat. Bumped shoulders with Tabi.

Voice of the Stubborn

Who cares? All of you just yap about nothing.

Voice of the Opportunist

Now that kind of attitude is why you're in the top half.

Voice of the Stubborn

Great.

Voice of the Opportunist

And that's why you're not the top.

“Can we see the ranking?” Razor called to Oli’s retreating back to the kitchen.

Voice of the Skeptic

I want to see what nothing does for us. And right now all of you aren't letting nothing happen.

Voice of the Cold

Hopefully this stuffs all the rest of them some place quiet. You need me, and you need to not have them.

The room was silent. Not a ruffle of someone moving, not air displacing, just silent, and dark, and cold.

Tabi understood what those words meant. She understood and wished she didn't. Because the only place 'quiet' they knew was where the Voices died in.

Shutting everyone else away... Was it even possible to shut Hero away? It didn't seem likely, he was there from the beginning and he was there now, still. But the fact Cold wanted everyone but him gone was extremely worrying.

Grace had frozen too, wrapped herself a bit tighter around Quiet. Tabi couldn't even see him from there. Worried for her shard, definitely.

Felipe moved suddenly, eyes blazing. "You scoundrel, how *dare* you say she needs you-?!"

Cain blinked, gaze going from Felipe, to Damiana, back at him, "She does."

Felipe flinched as if struck. Was it her imagination, or was the room getting warmer? Cain blinked, not moving as Felipe took a step forward. "What gives you the right to say such depraved things, knave? To order yourself above one who knows her more than you? To do as you please, to subject her to such horror--"

"You would shelter her," Cain replied, voice cool. "Keep her locked away. Afraid for her, but telling her she's happy. Look. She's making choices with me."

Tabi resisted the urge to look between the two men, instead focusing on her sister. She looked paralyzed, pale and misty-eyed. Scared. Tabi's breath hitched.

"Making choices no one should have to make, you fiend!" Felipe's voice raised, and his shadow raised on the wall with it. "You dare ride a high horse as you have her ride into your battles? You dare try to separate her from those she trusts? She ended up here on your word, but acting in service of those she trusted."

"My word? She could have said no."

"You cornered her, you absolute arse-!"

"This isn't about her!" Ciro cut in like a knife. Tabi rubbed her eyes, she could have sworn his edges were wavering. "You fucker, when we fought-- the first time, it was all of us against her, us against the entire fucking world! Us together was the point, was it smooth sailing, no, but we knew the enemy! And now you want us to die? You're acting like you're better than us! I don't know where you got that idea, but cut it the fuck out."

Cain hadn't copied the flurry of movement that erupted from Ciro, this time. "I don't want you to die."

"Oh yes, because I interest you?!"

"Yes."

Something in Ciro retreated, some sort of realization made him get back down as Smitten was practically dragged by Dami tugging on his arm. Maybe him sitting back down in a way that hid Paco and Ave from view was unintentional.

If ineffective, because Paco peeked out from behind him, gesturing at the screen. “I have been keeping the body alive all this time, kill me and you die too.”

Cain’s eyes swept over the room. Looking for the next one to snap.

“You can try,” Oli practically chirped, “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

"Can't even trust your own voices in your head, huh?" Winnie, of all people, said.

“Think you can boss us around?” Gonchi growled.

“Don’t worry, rage-boy, that won’t happen,” Connie grinned, having regained some of his color back, “I’m pretty sure the Decider likes me more than him, in any case.”

Tabi sighed at that. She could see her breath.

Cain stared at Connie, without blinking. It lasted for a few seconds, then he looked away. Tabi could see Connie shivering where he sat.

Dami clicked once. Impulsively.

Voice of the Hunted

He'll get you killed by himself.

Voice of the Contrarian

Oh, all of us have gotten all of the rest of us killed at one point or another. That's hardly even a concern now.

The Narrator

As the little voices bicker amongst themselves, you do your best to stay still in the woods. It is difficult, and the more time you spend waiting, the harder it will be to sharpen your focus when you need it.

Voice of the Smitten

I wonder what we look like right now. Are we standing? Sitting? I like to think we have an air of dignity.

The Narrator

My point exactly.

- [Continue to do nothing.]

You have already committed to my completion. You cannot go further astray.

Tabi felt herself flinching back, her heart stuttering. It surely was very cold in the room.

“What the fuck?” Ciro shouted, voice wavery, “That is-”

“A crock of shit!” Gonchi completed it, eyes wide.

“She’s been watching the whole time,” Paco trembled, “She’s been waiting for us to let her out.”

“All this time, She could’ve taken Clara away then?” Winnie wondered. “All this time?!”

“She’s the one limiting the choices then, it’s not Quiet’s fault,” Tabi muttered, as always writing.

“That’s it then? We can’t even do something else because She won’t let us?” Connie griped.

“What’s the fun in chasing prey that can’t run away?” that was Beast, her head resting on her paws.

“Isn’t that a good thing? If they run Clara won’t be able to catch them.” Razor said.

“Isn’t Clara like- a ghost?” Winnie said, “Shouldn’t she be able to get out herself?”

“Oh, she’s *nothing* like me.” Grace said resolutely.

The Narrator

You slowly make your way through the umbral forest, bumping against unseen trees as you grasp through the darkness for a way forward. But eventually, you do make it to the cabin, or rather, you make it to the place a cabin should have been. Instead, all you find is an empty hill.

No, no. This isn't right. There's a cabin there. There's always supposed to be a cabin there.

There was only a hill suspended in nothing, cobblestones suspended in nothing. And a mirror, floating in midair.

Dami blinked, shivering in her dress, “Guys, is it possible to become selectively blind? Oh, nevermind, a cabin’s there. In midair.”

Voice of the Hero

Don't ask him about the mirror.

It hurt hearing him like that. So tired.

“Are you okay?” Tabitha barely heard Grace asking him, “How do I help?”

Voice of the Skeptic

He always says he never sees it.

Voice of the Paranoid

He always lies.

Voice of the Cheated

And he always makes it gone.

The Narrator

Stay focused. You still have a job to do, and it's best not to be distracted by fraying thoughts. There is no mirror. You know that as well as I do.

Voice of the Hunted

She's still here. Buried deep inside the earth.

Voice of the Cold

Just walk up the hill. You always give too much space to the others. It's why you always lose.

- (Explore) "And what's wrong with giving them space? What if it helps them? What if they need to be heard?"

“Exactly!” Dami nodded, “Thank you, Quiet!”

Voice of the Cold

They've been heard too much. It's why they are the way they are.

The Narrator

Exactly. They are delusions, and all that catering to them will do is drag you down to their level. You have to keep moving.

“Since when do you agree with the bastard?!” Ciro roared, hands twitching.

“I do not.” Cain said.

“That you does!”

Voice of the Hero

Or you could just give up.

- [Approach the mirror.]

The Narrator

You walk up the hill, hesitating just beyond the bounds of 'the cabin.

Voice of the Skeptic

The cabin that isn't there.

Voice of the Smitten

You've got to clean the mirror, haven't you? You've got to see what's in it.

Paco flinched back. "That's not necessary!"

"Why do we have to touch it?" Ava wondered. "There's no walls, we can walk around it."

It was strange, that mirror. it wasn't there in any chapter one, it was on the wall in a chapter 2, it was blocking the path in the two next chapters they had seen so far. Impossible to ignore. What was it?

Voice of the Stubborn

Smash it to pieces.

Voice of the Broken

She's on the other side, and we have to let her out. It's the only way we can be free.

Voice of the Paranoid

It's the only way we can have our thoughts back.

Voice of the Contrarian

Just go around it.

Voice of the Cold

Just do something. It doesn't matter what.

- [Proceed.]

That was... very strange. Never before had an option been so vague, so devoid of instruction or flair. Just an utilitarian 'proceed' that was quite at odds with the way Quiet wrote those options into existence.

Was the Choicemaker okay? Was he tired too?

From the corner of her eye, Ave straightened. Inwardly, she sighed in relief. They all needed to relax from everything this chapter did, once this was over.

The Narrator

... proceed? Proceed to where? I'm afraid you're going to have to be a little more specific.

“So He can see the chosen options? That’s weird...” Tabi muttered. Even weirder that he didn’t understand what the option meant.

Voice of the Hero

That's another new one. How do you keep coming up with new things? I hope this works better than nothing did.

Voice of the Opportunist

Of course it'll work. He always makes the best decisions. It's why he gets to make them!

Voice of the Cold

And it already has worked. It's gone, don't you see?

Voice of the Broken

We're one step closer to her.

The Narrator

The interior of 'the cabin' is much the same as the exterior of 'the cabin,' a dull, fuzzy, dreamlike nothing. It's empty and isolating, but there's just enough vague shape and unknown texture to suggest the structure therein, wrong and unsettling as it may be. The only object of note is a pristine blade buried in the dirt floor, a hint of its shining edge teasing through the sediment. The blade is your implement. You'll need it if you're going to do this right.

- [Take the blade.]
- [It's the only way forward.]
- [You've already tried everything else.]
- [Don't you remember?]
- [You have to take the blade.]

Voice of the Cold

Take it. It's the only way forward.

Just like that, the reassurance and certainty Tabitha felt, that the Choicemaker out of anyone was fine, evaporated.

“What the fuck-?!” Ciro stuttered.

Grey ones, there weren’t supposed to be any grey choices, not unselected ones. Let alone in brackets, restricting choice.

Tabi opened her mouth, wanting to ask Quiet if he was okay. Something made her turn her head slightly. Ave was looking straight at her, eyes wide. Slowly, as pandemonium broke

around them, he tilted his head very slightly. Right in Cain's direction. When had he stood?

Right. That answered two of her questions. Quiet was not okay, and Cain was, maybe, someone dangerous.

...and Cold had said something remarkably like the option menu when he had last spoken... maybe that was nothing.

"How... crude," Thelka said with a yawn. "You hurt them so much, when it could have been much easier if you didn't brute force your way inside."

"I'm sure it wasn't so easy." Clara said.

"Oh, but it is."

Most importantly, Tabi couldn't run now because Thelka was *fucking crazy*.

And Clara would do untold amounts of damage from being told 'no' *once*.

What else did she have to fear in her own home? No, if she were to run she'd have to know all the threats.

The Narrator

You reach down to take the blade, but as you do, the ground beneath it shifts, the weapon sinking deep into the earth. You lean over the hole and gaze into the abyss. It is so very deep. Deep in the bowels of the earth, you see something staring back at you. It fills you with dread.

Voice of the Hero

It's her.

Voice of the Paranoid

She's watching us. She never stops watching us.

There you are! My toy has finally come to finish his job.

A mask, completely cracked.

Gonchi grinned, muttering, "I got her."

Then Tabi, and the rest of the room, processed what the Clara in the screen said.

"Toy?" Dami winced. "That's-"

"I wasn't saying that to you, Dami." Clara said tiredly.

"That's still bad!" Winnie said. "People aren't toys, and you can't just kill the Choicemaker and go around saying that!"

“You just pushed and kept pushing-- What’s this dishonor? This unfairness?” Ava seethed.

The Narrator

With every word she speaks, the Princess in the pit blinks closer.

You dragged this out for so much longer than you had to!

The Narrator

And closer.

But it was always just a matter of time.

The Narrator

And closer.

You were gonna have to stop running eventually.

The Narrator

And closer.

Everything stops running eventually.

Ave gave a full body shudder.

“Her face is gone,” Winnie mumbled.

“Why does she have so many arms?!” Paco hissed.

“She looks like the thing in the dark,” Tabi realized. “So many arms...”

The Narrator

And closer.

Except for me! I've already taken your will and you're not getting it back.

Was Quiet the will? Was that what he represented? There must be a reason why the options menu went all grey before Clara said all that.

Cain had sat back down. Had he noticed her staring? She hoped not, she’d have to talk with Skeptic and some others after all that was over. She wasn’t about to let them live with someone who had said he kept them around because they were interesting.

No, he was locked in a staring contest with Ave. A standstill.

She counted, the Clara on the screen had a grand total of eight arms. Tabi shuddered again, she wasn’t fond of spiders but at least they weren’t actually malicious!

All that's left is for you to take my hand, and let. Me. Out. It'll be so much fun! You and me, together, exploring the world and spreading fear wherever we go! Well, mostly just me. But you'll get to be there too!

A trinket that gets to stay with me all the time, right by my side. A witness.

Nando inhaled sharply. Tabi saw his expression and recoiled. She had yet to see Hero this mad, or mad at all, and the way Nando looked spoke of hatred.

Not that she blamed him, what the Clara on the screen was describing sent shivers down her spine. Or perhaps that was the cold. Had to be, everything in her was gelid, not just her hands.

I can even make you a little cage if you want! Gilded and everything!

“Over my dead body,” Nando growled.

Now don't pause. Don't try to resist. I've already molded you into what I need, and you lost your power so long ago, don't bother working yourself into a frenzy to get it back.

The Narrator

Do something! Do anything that isn't taking her hand!

So she took the Decider's power but not his will? How did that work?

Voice of the Cold

This really was a lost cause, wasn't it? You sealed our fate when you refused to kill her.

Voice of the Hunted

Kill or be killed.

Voice of the Cold

Yes, I suppose you're right. Oh well.

They were still locked in that staring contest. Tabi wondered which one would move first.

Molded... that was a very specific description. The same one the thing in the dark had spoken when talking about her sister. Like they were clay, objects. Like they were nothing.

Voice of the Paranoid

There's no paralysis anymore. Is it because we've already given her what she wants?

- [You're just an object.]
- [A tool.]
- [You once were something else, a long time ago.]
- [But was that something you, or is it just a dull and jaded memory?]

- [There is no other ending here.]
- [Just take her hand, and set her free.]

“What is wrong with you?” Ava spluttered, balling her fists.

“He’s not a tool,” Connie seethed.

“He’s a person,” Nando continued.

“He deserves to make new memories.” Grace added.

The Narrator

You extend your hand to hers. For all her past cruelties, the moment feels gentle, tender even. I can't believe you just made me say that. I hate you.

Dami found herself aghast, “That’s not my fault!”

“Gentle? Tender? Are we seeing the same thing, Narrator?” Winnie tilted her head.

The Narrator

The motion is difficult at first, as if something still resists your efforts, but then that resistance gives way, and it's over.

Ahhhh. And that's the end! I wonder what we're going to do next.

The wig, the dress, the eight gloves spreading out of her, floating alongside the Nightmare who was still spreading darkness.

The knowledge hit Tabi like a truck, that despite her missing face, her missing mask, her missing body, the Clara on the screen was quite unaffected by what had happened in the uncountable chapters before the end.

How unfair, how frustrating. What was the use of plans upon plans if there was never a way out?

I didn't think I'd be so... tired. Why is it so cold?

The hands tore a hole in reality when the Clara on the screen slumped, taking her to the place the Voices went to die. Tabi had been half afraid they wouldn't.

There was that mirror once again. The sight of it gave her the chills.

You do not get the chance to respond, nor will you ever. It's time to leave. Memory returns.

Voice of the Broken

She's gone.

Voice of the Skeptic

Yeah. I can finally think again. Almost.

Tabi pushed Skeptic with her shoulder. He pushed back, a little more aware. Good, good, she would've really started to worry otherwise.

Voice of the Hero

That mirror's back...

Voice of the Contrarian

What does that mean for us?

Voice of the Cheated

I'm sure it'll be whisked away just like her.

Voice of the Hunted

Maybe it won't be gone. Things are different now, aren't they?

Voice of the Paranoid

It doesn't seem like there's much else to do here.

Voice of the Stubborn

Finally. We can smash it.

Tabi felt dread pooling at the base of her stomach. Where was the fear from before? Why were they so casual about it?

Voice of the Cold

Oh will you stop with the smashing?

Voice of the Smitten

What do we say, boys? One last vain attempt to look at ourselves?

Voice of the Hero

Yeah. I think I'd like that.

Voice of the Opportunist

Seems we've got a majority. All that's left is to give it a look.

You step towards the mirror once more. Its secrets remain hidden. Its mysteries remain unresolved.

Voice of the Hero

Something tells me that this is the end of the line, but I don't feel bad about it. I'm ready.

And then her soul fell to her feet. That wasn't Hero's usual dialogue. Nobody should be ready to die like that.

"No," Nando whispered, "Not yet..."

Voice of the Broken

It feels okay.

Voice of the Paranoid

The fear's gone.

"I don't trust like that." Paco muttered.

Voice of the Stubborn

I'm done fighting.

Ava held Gonchi tightly. Neither of them spoke.

Voice of the Smitten

My heart feels quiet.

"Mine isn't," Felipe told Damiana, "And I'm not going anywhere."

Voice of the Cheated

The game was always going to end.

Voice of the Cold

I'll be free of all of you.

Tabitha got her answer to who would lose the staring contest. Cain, from the plastic glass
Ciro threw at him. It nailed him in the head.

Voice of the Skeptic

I'm ready for the truth.

Voice of the Hunted

I'm ready to sleep.

Voice of the Contrarian

I'm just ready to be anywhere that isn't here.

Voice of the Opportunist

Boys, it's been an honor.

"It has, my friend," Felipe nodded at Oli. Slightly stunned, Oli nodded back.

Dami's face was teary as the Voices faded away, "I'm sorry for what I made you do. And I hope the 'you' from that time find peace."

You've withered.

Dami wasn't looking at the screen. Good, because she would have seen how the body in the reflection was a dripping mess, rotting and peeling skin from itself.

Tabi could barely start to process before all that was gone and they were back with the thing in the dark, holding the remains of Clara. She still winced at the way two of the arms dug their hands into Clara's hole of the wig.

I am a growing chorus of contradiction. A mass of tides ebbing and flowing all at once in more directions than my attention can bear to hold. To look at any one is to shift them all into something new, and to look away is to reshape them yet again. All of me is changing, and yet the rest of me is still the same.

Ciro rolled his eyes, beyond frustrated, beyond exhausted, "Oh my god... hop off his dick, lady."

Skeptic snorted, surprising even himself.

Tabi didn't even get to see the other options besides the one that her sister chose, confident in her role as the Decider, not afraid to face a slumbering goddess alone.

- (Explore) "It doesn't matter how many times I go back. At least one of us always hurts the other. Doesn't that change you? Doesn't that make you worse?"

Being dehumanized like that still hurt. The thing in the dark wasn't the one who hurt them, *Clara* was. But it wasn't a bad question. Was Dami doing anything for her?

It changes me, but it doesn't make me worse, nor does it make me care for you any less. Does it make you worse? Do you resent me?

How wouldn't that make Her worse? Even Damiana had to endure death, it changed all of them, therefore it had to change the thing in the dark as well.

Tabi locked onto one of the options, *"No, not really. It all seems so distant as soon as I'm near you'."*

Could it be something She did, she wondered, to make Her prey calm? Like She put all of them to sleep? Now She had the power to make people hurt and die in Her mere presence.

What on earth was the thing in the dark?

- Yes. You're torturing me, and I hate it. I think I hate you.

For a moment, Tabi was surprised. Then she remembered the events of the chapter, and she was not. Nobody deserved to go through what they did, let alone her sister.

She tried to put herself in the shoes of the actual Decider. His memory returned, so he must remember the Damsel, the Thorn. How he had to bring Her people. But his Voices and himself had been hurt beyond measure in this route. He must be feeling...

Hurt, in pain, grieving, betrayed.

Something large and clogging in her throat made it hard to swallow.

What would Tabi herself do? If her sister, if Skeptic, if everyone she cared about was hurt to the point they gladly welcomed death.

She wouldn't rage, maybe, she would go quiet. The thing in the dark tried to be forthcoming unlike the Narrator, but She spoke in ways that obscured meaning. Metaphor and prose and comparisons. Her voice was floaty, echoy, inhuman. It spoke through bodies like they were mere puppets. Whatever that thing was, conversation wasn't Her forte, nor was compromise,

Nonetheless, Tabi would want an apology for past hurts, a chance to rest. An acknowledgement, maybe.

You are what brings me meaning. Know that the pain of your journey will subside in due time. But you still have a ways to go before we are done.

"What?" Dami breathed, "No, that's not..."

Connie laughed, the aching kind that made the thing in her throat thicken.

Tabi should have expected that. A complete dismissal. The thing in the dark didn't understand, couldn't perhaps, that an assurance that the pain was temporary did nothing for the feeling very much present. That was not an apology, that was an acknowledgement of a role. What brought Her meaning, what kept Her existing.

"That doesn't mean anything," Grace said, "It doesn't matter how much you love someone if you hurt them. Someone who doesn't know you can hurt you, someone who hates you. The pain could fade, but the memory will always be there. That's not for *you* to decide!"

What she was definitely not expecting was for Damiana to rapid-fire clicks until the mirror broke once again, signaling the end of the chapter.

"That's it. I'm done."

Tabi stood on shaky legs. Turned on the lights. And for a moment, as her eyes adjusted, she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Beast, curled up on her sofa. Clara, made a black lump on the floor. Thelka and Borja. All of them, sound asleep.

Oleander jumped up as if electrified, “Finally, finally, *finally*. We have to move.”

Skeptic was shaking his head, as if waking from a dream, “What did you do?”

“Do you really think Miss Trinket would’ve let us leave?” Oli asked back as Gonchi and Ava jumped up. Ave and Paco stood together, Paco already heading for the door. “Tea wasn’t the only thing I served them.”

Tabi looked at Quiet, remembering he was not okay, and suddenly she understood.

Now that Tabi could take a good look at Quiet, she didn’t think he had moved from his position since the beginning of the chapter, or even before. His eyes were wide, hollow, distant. Staring into somewhere far away, a vast emptiness. Wherever he was, it was far away from them.

“I can carry him,” Nando insisted when Gonchi got near.

“All the way back home, you can’t, Nandito.”

He still looked like he wanted to protest, but still, Nando stood and gently prodded at Quiet’s side until he rose, unsteady feet caught as each of their arms were slung over the two boys’ shoulders. To his credit, Nando handled their weight well. Ave flanked to their side, eyes darting around the room, then tucked himself behind.

Oleander hustled the rest of the group, frantically ushering them up and getting them moving as Ciro whisper-hissed to Paco something Tabi couldn’t catch. Tabi held Skeptic’s hand a moment before he rose, searching his expression for the same listlessness in Quiet’s, though saw focus somewhere behind his eyes.

For a moment, she’d been afraid he would have been lost in his thoughts in such a way she wouldn’t be able to reach him, no matter what she did. That must have been the reason why she impulsively threw her arms around him, a reassurance that he was present in both mind and body. The *relief*.

And if she felt a kiss being fleetingly pressed to her forehead as she pulled away, she was cold, but she had room for one more secret.

He nodded to her, a half-hearted smile weakly forming on his lips as he stepped back, joining the rest of the group.

She had half a mind of going with, but someone would have to think up a lie to tell the sleeping ones, someone would have to pacify Thelka when she discovered Borja wasn’t by her side. Winnie had fled upstairs, maybe she’d be game for theorizing. She was good at lying. They’d need to cover all the bases.

She glanced at her sister to see her boyfriend had not, actually, moved. Didn’t seem to be inclined to, even. He caught her eye.

“I’m not going with them. I already told my beloved I wasn’t going anywhere, and what sort of man would I be if I didn’t keep my promises?” he smiled.

Tabi smiled back thinly. That threw a massive obstacle in her plan to talk to Dami about Felipe’s... everything. And she was sure Damiana didn’t like this turn of events either, if her slight frown was any indication. She would figure something out, even if it was something as innocuous as ‘sisterly time’.

She blinked, realizing Ava must want a goodbye of her own, and yet—where was she? Stormed off, maybe, though Tabi thought to give herself the credit to notice an earthquake when it happened. She followed the group out the door, wondering. There, farther away than she thought they’d have managed so quickly, there was Ava—Borja’s enormous body slung over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Tabi blinked, astonished.

And in that blink — *poof* — they were gone.

Avellano felt dizzy — he preferred running better than this sort of travel — but he straightened quickly, ignoring his stomach and his back. They were back home, all of them. All thanks to Oleander’s plan. To think he had thought having a culebra in the pack wouldn’t be beneficial.

Connie had recovered surprisingly quickly — he was even smiling! “Aw, you *do* care!”

A very reckless hatchling, that one was. He had mocked the largest predator in the area within seconds of seeing her, knew how to defend himself, knew how to make people hurt with just words. But still, he was reckless.

Oli looked away at once, whatever would come out of his mouth would be a lie, “Who’d finish writing your book if you got killed? I had to do something.”

Ave had not appreciated having a snake in their midst, but he had forgotten even opportunistic predators knew how others of their kind thought.

Someone pushed him — Paco, the one others had been calling his brother. He could see why. They were similar, Paco had pricked ears, like him, similarly on alert for threats and dangers. Unlike Ave, Paco was unstable. His self-preservation instinct was over-tuned, he shouldn’t have overridden the body, he still didn’t understand the danger in ignoring one’s limits yet. He would have to explain later.

“Did you see what the multi-headed one did to the bladed one?” oh, Paco was talking to him. “She was about to attack, but she didn’t.”

No, he didn’t see, he was too busy following Gonchi and Nando, trying to make sure nobody snuck up on them. A whole predator had slipped past his radar, one he knew well, two if he had to count the actual enigma that was the five-in-one.

He dodged past others to follow Gonchi and Ava, each having gone to place the incapacitated ones in their nests.

His predator had said they evolved to catch them, and his flock had evolved to evade them. As much as he didn't want to admit it, she wasn't wrong, that was his relationship to her (even though ~~he failed, and it burned~~ **burned** **burned**), and from what he knew, that also was Ciro and Paco's relationships to their monsters.

Contrasting that, Gonchi and Ava were a mate's pair. They were almost ready to go at it when they were sitting there, uncaring of the danger around them. This was not how he had envisioned bringing Ava into the pack, into the flock. Gonchi may have trusted her, but she scruffed Quiet in an instant with no prior warning—and was impervious to Ciro's retaliations. A powerful, loyal mate, but a dangerous enemy. Someone extremely quick to react violently.

"Quiet's still not answering me," Gonchi emerged from the door, fingers thrumming what Ave knew to be the threads that connected him to Quiet, "I don't know what to do."

"He's scared," Ave said simply, "He can't stop thinking about it."

"You can get stuck thinking stuff you don't want to think about?" Ava met up with them after dropping Borja, eyes wide, the sound of her hooves very noticeable, "That's horrible!"

Yes, those two were a pair, others were... he couldn't describe it. Borja had glided to his monster, a monster that dwarfed even the largest of the flock and stared at him with something between hunger and possession in her eyes. Borja had curled into her lap like a loyal dog to its owner. That was not natural. Something in Borja was corrupted and taken by the largest one, by that Thelka, and she was holding that something hostage.

To put it simply, Borja was sick. Infected. Everyone could see it, the adoration and need in his eyes as he looked up at her. A corruption of the way things functioned. There were flickers of truth within him. Ave had spotted it all day, the way he flinched when she raised her voice, his hunched posture — trying to hide, conceal. camouflage from his predator, even as his sickness compelled him to stay by her side.

Ave didn't know the antidote, and he could only hope it was not contagious.

He could understand Nando being there, he was worried, he couldn't look past it, but why was Paco there too? Surely he wasn't there to keep him company. Ave reviewed the events in his head, Paco had told Quiet that--

Ah. Paco thought he wasn't feeling well. Ave was touched by his concern, but that couldn't happen, not now.

He was right at Quiet's door, and there he would stay.

The others were a little distance away, waiting for news. Nando was there, and so was the mirage.

'Grace' confused him. He could see her, could hear her, but his other senses told him she was not there. She had stopped running a long time ago, yet there she was, floating instead.

Protecting someone the way she hadn't been protected. Protecting people from her actual monster.

Ave felt his hackles rise once he spotted him in the crowd.

Him.

Ave wasn't about to let him near one of the most vulnerable packmates.

"I know what you did," he growled, could feel himself tensing up, "You made Quiet forget, back there, on the screen."

Cain stopped, the slightest twitch to his lips, as if that was something to be proud of, "I did."

"What are you talking about?" Skeptic, notebook at the ready, as always.

"He said so himself!" Connie pointed out, "Something about needing to forget or to not feel much!"

Skeptic stayed still as a statue for a moment, processing. Then, a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"What?" That was Gonchi, nearly spitting fire. "What do you mean 'thank you/?!'"

"Ave said Quiet's scared." Skeptic started, making to hold his hands up then letting them hang at his sides. "Forgetting the terror is a mercy."

Ave felt the beginnings of a growl in his throat. In what way could having a predator near him make him any less scared? Especially someone who said he wanted to thin out the pack?!

"I helped him last night," Cain said, a stone wall, "I just have to help him again. He thinks he's in pain. I can show him he's not. Take the suffering away."

Nando recovered quickly from that revelation. "He wasn't okay this morning-- he wouldn't answer me, he got hurt."

"He hurt him," Paco nodded. "We all saw that."

"You did too!" Skeptic gasped, hands shaking, glasses askew. "I failed, and everyone else did, so many times I couldn't even give you a *number*."

"Nobody knows what happened in those chapters." Paco said, tensing alongside Ave.

"I know what you did with the metal one. What you and the flighty one tried. Panicking and dodging didn't save us, it just prolonged it. You had no plan. You weren't thinking."

"How did taking away his choices help him?" Nando glowered, teeth clenched. Tense, ready to rush them.

"You were telling him to give up the whole time, Cain at least helped end things. Accept it, Cain did more for Quiet than you ever did."

It dawned on Ave. Skeptic was terrified, still. His hands shook. Couldn't think right. Like Paco and his overturning. He had to make him see straight. Had to protect. Explain.

"Quiet doesn't need him right now," Nando countered, drawing to his full height. If he was hurt from the comment, he wasn't showing it. "I've been helping him with his shutdowns the whole time. It will pass, it always does."

Cain did the same, looking down at him. Intimidation attempt. "It will pass without you."

Ave saw the slightest of trembles in Nando's frame. "He just needs time."

"How much? A day? A week? Months? You know it was bad. You were so willing to give in before. Begging to forget."

"That wasn't here and now. I'm not leaving him alone." Ave wondered if Nando realized one of his hands was curling into a fist.

Cain was moving, going on the prowl. The same monster who had called him worthless. The first monster Ave had taken on and won. The same monster who had hurt Quiet. Who wanted to hurt him again.

Cain shifted, not breaking stride, not even looking at him. And then Ave saw it: his opening.

And he pounced.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! This is a reminder that this fic has a discord!

<https://discord.gg/EqNQvpgJDT>

Chapter 12: Hold my hand even if I cry

Chapter Summary

Answers are given. Time is needed.

Chapter Notes

Was told the names were confusing if they were at the end so here they are, at the beginning!

Broken - Borja

Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi/Gonzalito

Cold - Caín

Contrarian - Connie

Hunted - Avellano/Ave

Opportunist - Oleander/Oli

Paranoid - Paco/Paquito

Cheated - Ciro

Hero - Fernando/Nando

Smitten - Felipe/Feli

Skeptic - Harrier/Harri

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Ave licked a droplet starting to drop from his lower lip as Nando finished dragging the bureau in front of the door. His nerves had calmed somewhat, though his back was starting to ache.

He'd gotten him in the hand. Cain had reacted. Pity. He'd been aiming for his neck. At least he had gotten first blood.

Nando walked back, further into Quiet's nest. Sat on the opposite edge, frozen, as though not knowing if he should look at the door or at Quiet himself.

"Si alguien llega a pasar por esa puerta, me lo como al horno con papas." Ave tried reassuring him.

There was still a commotion outside, but they were safe. The entrance was blocked, and the only non-corporeal didn't wish them harm. He'd need to wash his mouth — the taste was *vile* — but first he had to help Quiet.

Sitting on the bed, staring at nothing. Fear everywhere, but body relaxing. Preparing for a death that wouldn't come. Thin hands relaxed at his sides.

The chooser confused him, sometimes.

Like Ave, he was more affectionate now; less skittish and afraid. Not fond of being snuck up on. Always tired. Overturned instincts, tended to freeze or fawn in response to a threat.

But he placed himself in front of Connie when it seemed like the larger monster, Thelka, would attack. Didn't even think about it. Why?

He didn't tend to eat much.

That was something Ave noticed more and more. Quiet would have a plate and always struggle to finish it, but couldn't seem to set it aside. The first few times, he wouldn't leave the table until he was reminded of it. He still seemed intent to give at least a bit of his portion to Ave.

Avellano didn't know hunger as intimately as his friend seemed to. There had been nights when his packmates were too rowdy to risk nearing, but that rarely happened for several nights in a row. Maybe he might not tolerate food well. Yet Ave always saw Quiet with a full plate, which was then looked at with this upsetting dread.

And so, he always accepted Quiet's offer to finish his plate. He couldn't stand watching Quiet agonize, slowly forcing down bite after bite. Not that overloading your stomach to the point of nausea was any better.

He didn't want to call it fragility... but he didn't want to see Quiet hurting.

Nando reached out, taking one of Quiet's hands in his. "Listen to me," he murmured, and Quiet's gaze was upon him at once. Not quite aware. Quick, obedient. It made something heavy drop to Ave's stomach. "I'm here. I'm not letting anyone hurt you."

"We're safe." Ave added, because everyone had been there, "Everyone's safe. You can rest. You've done enough."

Quiet blinked, looking at them. Really looking at them. Both Nando and Ave nodded. It shouldn't have surprised them when his eyes closed and he just... slumped. Breathing changed. Asleep.

Ave had been afraid he wouldn't trust them enough for that. Not after his failure the first time.

Nando sighed deeply. "Thank you."

Ave nodded at him. There was no need for thanks. He'd just done as he had to.

Quiet was laying on the ground.

There was a perfectly reasonable explanation for it. Honest.

That explanation being... being... um.

He was very warm, very tired and in pain. His lower back was pressing into the fuzzy rug up against the tub, and his ankles were still hooked over the edge of said tub.

He didn't move. He was all loose-limbed, completely unsure on how long he was in the shower for – well, long enough that his fingers and toes pruned up impressively.

He had woken up to Nando halfway on top of him, tear tracks on his face. Curiously, Ave was taking up the bottom half of the bed. So, obviously, he wasn't going to wake them up.

He hadn't fallen. Standing was just... not an option when Quiet finally gained enough awareness to get out of the shower.

Well, it *was*, for about four seconds. And then Quiet flexed his leg and was rewarded with the delightful sensation of a knife being driven right below his kneecap. It rooted down to the arch of his foot, and any idea of standing was promptly thrown out the window like Connie would do.

So, he tried to drag himself out. His arms trembled the entire time, pins and needles down his spine. Then they gave out, and to the floor he went, the impact reverberating through his body and slamming the air out of him.

Which left him in full display to no one. Every scar, every mark, every handprint etched in his disgusting body, many he shared with his Voices, so many more he didn't. The sight of them repulsed him. It made him think he hadn't escaped, not really.

There were too many what-ifs to think about— and he still had to get up, and get dressed, and talk to Nando and Ave, and maybe wonder what was about that dream — and there was so much he had to do— it was all weighing down on him, and Quiet was *hurting*—

A sudden chill in the air made him want to curl up. He craned his neck to look upside down at the door-- a translucent head peeked through.

“I heard a noi- oh my *god!*” Grace covered her eyes at once. “I’m so sorry!”

And away she went.

His involuntary twitch to cover himself didn't help any. It only made him hiss at the feeling of pins and needles and knives. His limbs locked up.

That reminded him of a Princess he fought once. Could slowly paralyze him if he looked at her in the eyes. What he called her escaped him, but he remembered very clearly her plucking out his eye.

That had hurt more than some other deaths he had experienced. Quiet had racked her face with his claws for that. And then got stabbed in the throat for the trouble.

...he should get up. And apologize to Grace. Was all of yesterday real after all? It didn't seem possible, it felt mocking, it felt unbelievable. He remembered watching the Nightmare take off her mask (and that was NOT how it looked like!) then it was--

No, he wasn't thinking about that! He just hoped someone had taken the role of the Decider away from Dami.

The role of the Decider... like it was something so easily passed around, so easily replaceable. Like everything he did could be transferred to someone else, like he was nothing.

His limbs were heavy, like they were full of rocks. He really didn't want to get up.

"May I come in?" Grace's voice, from behind the door.

For the briefest of moments, he wasn't there anymore.

Could it be a trick? Something he knew he had to refuse? He hesitated. Accept, and lose all the leverage he had. Refuse, and risk the possibility of punishment. How was he supposed to respond? *Should* he respond? Would he get in trouble if he said yes? Would She be angry if he said no? He was not sure, he wasn't sure, and it was enough to make his hands start to shake.

Then he remembered this was a completely different situation. And Grace couldn't hurt him. Only if he made her really mad. Better not risk it. "Come in. No peeking."

"Killer, I have been inside you, nothing you have there could scare me."

The door opened, and Quiet got an answer to 'How could a ghost carry clothes in the first place?'

The answer was, as he was seeing with his own eyes, a towel ghost. Which he grabbed at once, surprised to note she had, in fact, her eyes tightly shut. He had expected her to try to peek.

With effort, he lowered his legs to the floor, uncaring of the pain, and tried to make himself decent.

"Welcome back to the world of the living." Grace said, still not looking at him.

"...should I be concerned that you of all people told me that?"

He could see her smile. "No, if you were a ghost you wouldn't have fallen like that."

Underwear on, sweatpants on — putting on jeans and the like on damp legs was always so needlessly complicated — and for his torso— wait.

"This is Nando's," Quiet said.

Grace did look at him that time. "It could be anyone's."

Quiet shook his head, some of his locks obscuring his vision. “No, I know how he smells like.”

“...and how does he?” She looked actually interested.

“Like the woods.”

He felt better already. Calmer. Fernando tended to have that effect on him. Being dressed at all probably helped too. He decided to just sit on the rug for now.

He looked up at her floating form, mouth opening, before all his bravado left him and went back to staring at the floor.

He shivered as Grace’s form circled him, as it was tradition. “I’m not Her, remember?”

Mischievous eyes gazing from sunken pits. An utter lack of a nose. Wavy hair floating, cloudlike. No, of course Grace wasn’t like Her. Maybe he could ask questions this time.

He’d start simple. “What happened?”

“We got away. Oleander gave sleeping tea to all the major threats-- and Thelka’s shard. You weren’t answering, so they had to improvise.”

Quiet wanted to kick himself, he had gone through with all that farce so he could help his voices in case something went wrong and he ended up becoming dead weight. And of course, they didn’t do as he asked and left him there. Everyone had gotten away safely, that was what mattered.

Wait. Oli had done that? His Opportunist? All by himself? Why?

“Why are you here?” That... came out harsher than Quiet had wanted it to. “Why did you claim me as your shard?”

Grace giggled, “I did say I’d end up haunting you, remember? But,” she looked away from him, whatever she was remembering he didn’t know, “The chilly one always gave me the creeps, to be honest. I just picked the better one.”

He blinked. “And you chose me for that? You could’ve picked Nando. I know you think he’s nice.”

Her right hand came up to fix the way his hair parted, so it wouldn’t look like he had an ant trail going across his head. “You still were the one who did everything you could to help me. That counts for something.”

“Does it? Anyone could’ve done it. You’ve been in my shoes with this game.”

Grace rolled her eyes, and her head to emphasise the movement. “Killer, being the Decider was awful. It was exhausting. Crowded too. And from what I’ve seen, my route was one of the nice ones! And you kept going anyway! That’s incredible!”

“I didn’t have much of a choice.”

She sighed. “Go back to bed and warm up, you’ll catch a cold.”

He was standing up before he was aware. “Do you know why Ave’s sleeping here too?”

She wasn’t looking him in the eye. “I’ll tell you once you wake up again, alright? It’s dark out.”

Quiet came back to consciousness slowly. He was warm, and nothing was hurting, and he didn’t want to think. So when he opened his eyes, it was with reluctance.

Nando next to him, a blanket covering him up to his elbows. He was reading with a thoughtful expression.

Quiet knew and loved that face. He’d seen it at dusk, in some secluded part of the house, while Nando gazed at his reflection in the window, sipping on a cup of tea. Quiet’d seen it in the afternoon, while Nando thoughtfully chewed on a pencil, when he drew sketches of birds or other animals, places that for some reason seemed beyond words and which Quiet always suspected never existed. Quiet had often looked at that absent and unguarded face, but he had never looked at it in the morning, while Nando was reading.

It took an embarrassingly long time for Quiet to realize he had unintentionally captured his friend’s left arm and had so contentedly been using it as a pillow. And Nando had let him.

It felt like too much. He didn’t know how to be cherished. He didn’t know if he wanted to be cherished this way. Yet he never turned Nando away, only reciprocated.

It was just being held, and not even that, it was being allowed to rest, yet it felt like more. It always felt like more.

Maybe it was the grief. The way every touch, every look of his was tender and affectionate. Tender, like he might shatter in a moment’s notice. Affectionate, like come tomorrow that memory would be a fever dream.

“Slept well?” Fernando tore his gaze of his book. Quiet felt caught, for a moment. He hadn’t been doing anything wrong, had he? “You’ve been sleeping for… fifteen or sixteen hours? Didn’t want to wake you. You needed the rest.”

Had he actually been asleep for that long?! He definitely missed lunch then, and he had to check on the others, after yesterday were they okay? He knew they had gotten away safely, but that didn’t mean they were okay. And why…?

“Why did you take me with you?” Quiet whispered, supporting himself with his arm so that Nando’s own could regain blood flow. “I told Paco to leave me behind if things went wrong.”

Nando closed the book. Left it on the night table. Turned towards him. Those black eyes pinned Quiet in place, but he wasn’t afraid. How could he be afraid of the one who had

always been by his side, even when it wasn't a necessity, with eyes the warmest dark and moles decorating his face like constellations?

If anything, Quiet was more afraid of disappointing him. Something frigid settled in his stomach at the mere possibility.

"You weren't answering," Nando whispered back. "You would have died if we left you there."

"I die a lot. You know that. I could say I'm even used to it. And I survived, remember? I came back." Quiet tried to inject confidence into his voice.

As it turned out, Fernando could pin him to the bed pretty effortlessly. He was heavier than he appeared, but it wasn't like Quiet was making a serious effort. He was trying to process the last second.

"And that makes it okay?" Quiet nearly shook with the intensity in Nando's gaze. "Do you think that makes it *fine*?" he asked, voice getting lower. "Because it's not. This shouldn't even be a choice now, it isn't healthy-"

"Trying to tough out a death on behalf of someone else isn't healthy? We did that once!" Quiet said, keenly aware of how he wouldn't be able to move until Nando let him.

Too far. He'd just crossed a line, and he knew it. The truth was, he didn't want to die. He may have been a thing, but he was a living thing.

"I was wrong that time." Nando blinked away the hurt Quiet had definitely seen, smiling. "And luckily for you, I'm not gonna let you try."

"But—"

"I'm serious. I don't want to find out what sort of person I would become, if you were taken away from me."

Quiet frowned. He couldn't picture Nando changing for the worse, not for him. He kept his eyes open so he wouldn't see blood and gore and silence behind his closed lids. "If you were ripped away from me, I don't think I'd be strong enough to bear it."

"Glad that's settled."

Nando peeled himself off of Quiet and laid back down, grabbing his book again. Quiet wondered why he was keeping him company so late. Like he was guarding him. The bureau was still halfway blocking the door.

"Are you two done?"

Quiet startled, nearly covering himself with the blankets. He wasn't two, for the love of everything. Ave had just walked out of the bathroom, looking at Nando with a peeved expression. "Glad to see you moving, Quiet."

Don't get him wrong, Ave was one of his people that Quiet valued the most, but he still didn't know why he was in his room of all places. Maybe the Beast had scared him and had wanted company? Quiet himself did that enough after a nightmare...

"The ghost wants to talk to you," Ave informed him, jaw set. Quiet could understand, most of the Princesses weren't people Ave would want in the pack. And even if they were, they were still other, and Ave wouldn't trust them as a matter of principle. "Privately, I think."

Ave then proceeded to stare at Nando until he got the message to *start moving*. Which he did, taking his book with him. Knowing him, he would be less than thirty steps away by the time Quiet finished talking.

The door had barely closed when Grace floated in, without knocking this time. She circled him one or two times before settling down next to him. Briefly, Quiet wondered if she could sleep at all.

"How much do you remember from yesterday?"

"Clara took off her mask and then... I was here." He decided to not tell her what he had seen. He would rather forget it.

"Well, yes, she took off her mask and-- there was a lot of... weird stuff about cycles and death and rebirth. I don't think reincarnation is a thing for me so I wasn't paying much attention to that. Then there were many chapter names at once, and the title--"

"The Moment of Clarity." Quiet completed.

Grace nodded. "You'd forgotten everything. Your shards weren't acting right. On the screen and here."

Quiet sighed so deeply he felt his lungs ache. "I never wanted them to see that."

The thought of his people, *his people* seeing themselves in their worst moments because of something he had chosen to do made him feel sick. How he'd let everyone down. They had shattered because of *him*.

"The room kept getting colder-- the others kept shivering. I felt it too, a little." Grace continued. "And... you know how I said I picked the best shard?"

Quiet tried to find some mockery or condescension in her voice. He found none. Grace had the title of the strangest princess he had ever encountered.

"I am very glad I didn't pick the chilly one."

Exasperation came out of his next exhale at the same time he felt a pit in his stomach. "What did Cain do?"

"What didn't he do?" Grace took a breath she didn't need. "He just began... picking on others. Teasing. Fighting. First with Connie, and... the him on the screen said something bad."

Something terrible, truly terrible. And they all froze and they didn't know how to react. Then the Sweet-heart did react--

"Who?"

"'Lovesick shard' was too much of a mouthful."

"Ah." Felipe, then.

"And they fought-- over Damiana, though I'm not sure why when she was hardly the central point of the real argument--and Ciro jumped in, too."

Quiet felt like he had stepped into a weird parallel universe for a moment. "Cain fought with someone for a girl?"

Grace shook her head, "I think he was just trying to anger Felipe more. You know," she smiled softly, "I think some of the others like you. Winnie straight up called you 'our choicemaker'."

That was something he had never expected to hear. The Witch liking him. It was also strange to think about, how the girls had taken to the 'we' game so readily.

He chose to ignore the fluttering in his soul for the moment. He'd think of what it meant that one of the girls was apparently fond of him after.

"The options menu was wrong too. A bit before the end, there were choices that couldn't be selected, and the girls thought the 'choicemaker' had been killed."

"What did the choices say?"

It was strange to see her face halfway to skeletal. *"Lies."*

If he thought about it, he could have an idea. "Let me guess. Something about how I was something to be used. I have heard that one before, and it's the simple truth. It's what I was made for, it's what I am."

Even stranger to see a ghost go completely, utterly still. "That's not true."

He'd rebelled against it, once. "I'm a gate."

"Killer, I don't know what that means but—"

"She said that I shaped the Princesses with what I did, but they always tried to leave the cabin, to leave for the Long Quiet." He knew how it went by heart. "To them I was a gate to something more, and any hurt I caused them was a fair price for freedom. Not a person, not an equal, a gateway. But it's okay, I'm fine with it."

"If that's what She told you, then She doesn't know anything at all."

"But that's what you did," he said, confused. "You made me carry you out, remember?"

Wrong choice. He knew from the moment she looked at him like that. Her misty form became darker.

“Yeah, I did ask to hitch a ride with you, but I didn’t just use you like some supernatural taxi! How can-?!”

She stopped talking abruptly, her eyes going wide.

Quiet’s back was flat against the headboard, found his own hands protectively covering his chest. His heart was traitorously pounding in his ribs as he let out a slow breath.

Grace looked more like a statue than a ghost. “You thought I was going to hurt you.”

His chest felt odd, like he couldn’t take a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

He breathed, waiting for her next movement. She breathed, her chest rising and lowering, even though she didn’t need to. The moment passed. Why? “Are you angry with me?”

“No,” she said so quickly he couldn’t discern if it was a lie. “I’m angry *for* you.”

“Why?”

“Kill- Quiet,” Grace began, and he couldn’t help but startle. “When we were joined together, it wasn’t in silence, remember? We talked. I learned about you, learned how you worked. I made a friend. And She made you *forget that*.”

Quiet still had his hands over his chest. A ridiculous gesture, he knew she could pluck his heart out the same way his eye had been.

Her eyes were huge all of a sudden, almost too close to him. “Do you think I’m disposable?”

The sudden non sequitur left him reeling. He shook his head.

“I’m not disposable. You are not disposable. You’re far more than a ride to hitch. You just... forgot. That’s not your fault.”

It all seemed so far away, that was all.

“...What happened after we escaped?” His voice was almost interrupted by another thought. He had almost said ‘after I died’.

“Things got... messy.”

“Messy how?” Now that he thought about it, he could imagine things happening if tension was high. “What did they do this time?”

He was being unfair. His people were grown, their mistakes were their own.

Grace raised her eyebrows. “Killer, there shouldn’t be a ‘this time’.”

“How bad is it?”

“Cain wanted to make you forget yesterday... none of the others liked that. He knew that and he pushed again until the wild one attacked him.”

Quiet wanted to put his hands on his head. Those two had come to blows again?! “Push? Cain doesn’t *push*.”

She shook her head at him, her form undefined at the edges. “Cain did push. The others were worried he’d hurt you. Besides,” she sniffed, “he didn’t ask. Was all proud that he’d made you forget the night before.”

They had been *worried* about him. The unfamiliar feeling made him almost smile, if not for what he was hearing. “He wouldn’t hurt me, he just... makes it difficult to feel for a while. That’s his thing.”

“The others thought he was the one who had made you forget, on the screen.”

That made him frown. Could that be a possibility? He didn’t think of that lost time much, actively avoided thinking about it. Could Cain, or Cold as he was back then, made him forget so much? Like what he had asked Cain to do not long ago? He had asked, had he not?

“I don’t think I like the person behind those eyes, is all.” Grace finished.

He nodded, sincerely appreciating the perspective of someone from the outside looking in. Even if she had been part of the flock for a little while, back when there was a cabin, a knife, and glass shards.

She seemed to be thinking something similar. “What you said earlier... I hurt you, didn’t I?”

Quiet raised his eyebrows. “It was my fault,” he kept going when she tried to speak, “I’m serious. It wouldn’t have happened if I didn’t treat you badly-”

That made that horrified look in her eyes recede. No, mix with something else. “You can’t hurt me, remember?”

He nodded. “You didn’t take kindly to having your death recreated, or me not agreeing to the ride. So tearing out my heart was the way to go.”

She stared at him. Oddly enough, she seemed more human-looking in the throes of disbelief. Skin darkened in an approximation of how she’d been in life-- he could almost see a nose, too! “I did that because you didn’t want to be possessed? Would opening the door and saying ‘Get out’ have done the trick?”

It was his turn to blink. “I don’t know,” he said, finally. “I never thought about it.”

There had never been much time to think, only to act. The times where he could think it was under pressure, or he could do nothing but think. Opening a door sounded so simple, so logical.

“Anyway,” she said with forced cheer. “Now that you’re awake, I can stop being traumatized.”

She was smiling, so was this a lighter topic? “What happened?”

“Killer, whoever said passing through walls could be a cool power was stupid,” she told him seriously. “You’re the third person I’ve had to see naked, and this is the third time since I got here!”

That was... troubling. “Who...?”

“The first time, Gonchi was naked, and Ava... she soon would’ve been, too.” Grace grimaced. “The second time they weren’t even making noise! I don’t know how they did that. I didn’t know you could even bend that way!”

He very much did not want those images inside his head. He was not thinking about that. “My sincerest condolences.”

Quiet lingered just before the doorway to the living room. There was definitely noise. High tension in the air, but not the dangerous kind. Anticipation and amusement came from his people’s threads.

Well, almost. Borja was sulking in a corner, utterly waterlogged and glaring at nothing. Experience had taught Quiet to stay away from him and his hands when he was like that. Out of the window, he could see an impressive storm. Buckets of rain poured, and occasionally lightning lit up the sky, followed by the crackle of thunder.

“What are they playing at?” the ghost tailing him whispered.

“Time Trial,” he felt a smile tug at his lips. This had the potential to be hilarious. “You play it in teams. You got dice with 1, 2 and 0 only. Roll the dice, pick a card with five random things written in it. And you have to describe the things to your teammates without saying the name in 30 seconds. The number on the dice subtracts from the number of correct answers.”

“Sounds easy enough.”

Paco was reading a card in front of Oli and Connie, both of whom were tense with anticipation. Quiet couldn’t see the words from where he was, but he felt himself being easily swept up in the atmosphere.

“One, two, three, go!” Ciro flipped the hourglass. Minute-glass?

“007.” Paco started, so quickly he almost didn’t open his mouth.

“James Bond!” Oli said at once.

“Yes!” Paco grinned. “Uh, day of the year where couples act all disgusting with each other.”

“Their anniversary.” Connie opined.

“No!”

“Birthdays?”

“No! Next one! Famous tennis player-”

“Next!” both Oli and Connie said together.

“Tinkerbell is a...” Paco asked leadingly.

“Man.” Oli said, with complete confidence.

Quiet had to snap a hand over his mouth as nearly all his threads vibrated with the same amusement. A flock of birds, screaming with laughter, crowing in chaotic unison. Connie leaned on a bewildered Oli for support. Ciro didn’t care that the time had run out, he was laughing so hard he was silent.

“I don’t think I’ve seen that movie!”

“Trans Tinkerbell, let’s go.”

Connie was *wheezing* with how hard he was laughing.

Quiet got his own laughter under control, crossed the threshold and swallowed his screech. It probably would have been a *chirp*, had he still been avian-like, but it wasn’t. But he still swallowed it back down and nearly slammed the door shut from the force of his flinch.

Cain was—

Right there.

Sitting on one of the couches like the most inconspicuous statue and just watching. Unfortunately for Quiet, it had already become a habit. Cain scaring him. Sometimes without even meaning to.

He didn’t want to slam the door, so he might have overcorrected a little by stepping forward, arms flailing in their effort to grab something to stop his momentum. The door swung open, taking Quiet with it.

Cain stared at him, waving slightly with — Quiet was alarmed to note — a bandaged hand.

“They were in quite the fuss last night.” Cain gestured with his head at the chorus of dwindling laughter. “It was amusing. You should’ve seen it... a shame. Oh well. There will be much more to see in the future, I suppose.”

“A fuss that you started.” Grace said. There was a shock of cold on his shoulders. It felt almost nice. She floated until she was in front of him.

“Yes. I did. Do you have something to say about that?”

“Not to you.” Grace seemed like she wanted to say a lot of things indeed.

Before Quiet could ask Cain for confirmation on what he knew, he felt a tug on one of his threads.

With the laughter dying down, Ciro had been sucking on the straw from the side of his mouth, like he was pretending to be the protagonist of a tango. The moment he laid eyes on Quiet, however, he gestured to him with his mate, offering it without hesitation as he tugged on his string. *(Relief) (Welcome)*

Incredibly, Quiet was tempted to accept it. Drinking mate was a way of remaining silent, of taking his time.

Then his eyes veered to the right, where Ave had just stepped out to join Quiet — where had he been? — and something there sharpened. Ciro gestured to Paco, who turned with his eyes wide. Looking for something. For what?

Those were practiced movements, Ave, Paco and Ciro usually moved like a group. There was one missing. And that one was the target.

Quiet could feel Ave stopping all movement. How he didn't know who to focus on. Too many gazes on him, and he didn't know which one to engage with.

So he didn't. Quiet felt the tension of his muscles about to take off like they were his own. No, those were his own, copying him. If Ave wanted to run, Quiet would run with him. Ave never did well on his own for long like that.

Ave didn't get to take two steps before slamming into a suddenly-there Ciro, "No you don't!"

"Just- not here!" Ave hissed.

Ciro obliged, the world warping. Quiet hunched his shoulders. His stomach was dancing the macarena, the pain reverberating in his skull. He had enough headaches to realize the kind of pain meant he would have to throw up to make it fade, but he had nothing in his stomach.

They — Ave, Ciro, Paco, himself — had been brought to Ave's room. Quiet had never really been inside it.

The bed, fit between two walls, was undone, resembling more of a nest of blankets than anything else. There was a sort of organized chaos, things stuffed in nooks and crannies. Under a desk Quiet could spot a decently-sized food stash. A big window covered by old curtains, from which they could see the storm raging on.

"You said you wanted to wait until the Decider was better," Paco started, and Quiet couldn't describe the emotion that swelled inside him, Paco still thought of him as the leader, no matter if he intentionally lowered himself in rank or was out of commission for the actual danger. "He's better now. There's something in your breathing. You've been hiding it, but I could tell. You're wheezing. What's wrong?"

Ave was tense, head snapping up to each of them. "I'm fine!"

(Calm) (Assurance) How can I help if I don't know?

“It doesn’t hurt!” he insisted, and Quiet could hear it, a whistling sound. But he also could see how Ave retreated to a corner, *tense, tense, tense*.

“Let him breathe!” he snapped, so he wouldn’t descend into *trapped, trapped, trapped*. “Let him be!”

Ciro sighed. “Just let us see whatever has Paco crazed here and we’ll cut the bullshit!”

Ave stared at them for one more moment, affronted. Then, to Quiet’s surprise, he took off his hoodie with quick movements. He could see bandages and gauze tightly wrapping on his shoulder, up to the point he could see, along with several burns that he matched with. Ave peeled the bandages away quickly, trying to get it over with. Whistling filled the air, impossible to ignore.

Then he turned around.

For a single moment that lasted an eternity, Quiet couldn’t comprehend what he was seeing. The first word his mind supplied him with was *Fury*.

A quarter of his back was gone. A tremendous hole that went from his left shoulder to his elbow. The skin went pink just before the edge, turning the red of flesh in the inner edge. He could see how much of a person was muscle. He could see five of his ribs and his scapula still with bits of flesh attached, along with the white bones of his spine. He could see his lung moving behind its boney cage, pumping oxygen, the cause of the whistling sound.

Ciro took several steps backwards. “What the fuck is that?!”

Paco had, immediately, started the chant that had kept Quiet himself alive once. It didn’t escape his ears that there was less whistling, less effort, to breathe. Ave had been hiding such a tremendous injury for months. Months! He could have, should have died in hours from it.

Quiet would never let him shatter like his father had. That much was clear in the way he was still alive. Was that a mercy? Ave didn’t seem to be bothered by it...

“Are you out of your mind?! That thing last night could-”

“I know.” Ave said tersely.

Quiet sighed. Honestly, he could scarcely believe Ave had chosen to do that, to hide that injury for months, because it should have been enough to kill him, and if not he must have been in pain, must have gone through efforts to hide it all this time, even when running and fighting.

He could have gotten hurt even more. And Quiet would have had no idea. But that couldn’t happen again. So he made sure to make Ave know, through their connection, that he wasn’t angry with him. Disappointment, however, he was feeling all of it. Not a loss of trust, nothing quite so damaging, nothing quite so devastating.

All at once, Ave seemed to wilt.

(Remorse) (Guilt) I'm sorry.

(Tiredness) (Forgiveness) Don't do it again, okay?

Quiet had an idea. Someone who could heal even if his temperament made him want anything but. It was obvious, truly. So he plucked one of his threads and gave it a tug.

(Drowsiness) (Warmth) Too early to be up.

(Urgency) (Impatience) Wake up, Gonchi, we need you here.

A moment of silence, then the unique feeling of 'holy-shit-you're-awake' before they all could hear footsteps rapidly approaching them. It was a very unique feeling, the fact that Quiet knew Gonchi was using his thread as a rope to locate him.

It was polite to knock. Therefore, Gonchi didn't, slamming the door open. Quiet chose not to mention the state of his clothes, and this was the first time he saw a knotted beard of all things. What he was aware of, however, was the way Gonchi's enthusiasm died a swift death when he got an eyeful of Ave's condition.

True to form, he only froze for one moment. Long enough for Ave to turn back around, reluctant to let anyone else see.

"Why are you here?" Paco started.

"Quiet called me," Gonzalo answered simply, already focusing on Ave. "Who did that to you?"

Ave's mouth snapped shut.

Gonchi shook his head, rushing towards Ave, who was tenser than a spring.

"Careful, he bites," Ciro warned before Gonchi could put his hand on him.

"Oh, I know."

Quiet looked between them all. There was something he was missing, why were Paco, Gonchi and Ciro smiling, why was Ave not meeting his eyes-?

Wait, back up. Reassess that thought. He was pretty sure what they were referring to.

"Why did you call him?" Paco turned to Quiet, "Last time I checked, I was responsible for making the body function."

Gonchi blinked, turning to him as well, "Ah, ¿no te habíamos dicho?"

"Tell me what?" Evidently, Paco was not in the mood for jokes.

"Oh yeah," Ciro turned to Quiet as well, "¿No se lo habías dicho?"

Paco's eyelid developed a twitch as he, too, stared at Quiet.

Sometimes, Quiet would blame Connie's subconscious influence for some of the things he ended up choosing. This time, he had no one to blame but himself, "Oh," he continued the third beat, unable to stop the grin spreading on his face, "¿No te lo había dicho?"

"Enough of that!" Paco raged, "What did you not tell me?!"

"Gonchi doesn't just fight hard, you know?"

Both Paco and Ave shook their heads in perfect unison.

"I mean, Gonzalo here always needed a little something in order to keep up with Ava-"

"The fuck do you mean by that?!"

Quiet didn't flinch when Gonchi slammed his palm into the wall, eyes like suns about to go supernova. He didn't.

It was a very close thing, though.

"You heal." Quiet said simply, crossing his arms so they wouldn't notice his hands shaking. "Do you think you could do the same to Ave?"

Gonchi's grin was smug in the way only experience could flavor it. "I don't think, I know. Look."

Under Ave's and Paco's watchful eyes, he placed a hand right beside Ave's injury.

It began to show at once. Muscles reknitting themselves in a way that made Quiet look away, blood connecting with itself and flowing once more. The sounds were something that made Ave wince and Ciro flinch. Paco started his chant once more. Ave's hands were gripping each other tightly. Quiet could relate, normal healing itched at the best of times, regrowing stuff like that was not pleasant in the least. To Ave's credit, he didn't move away.

When Gonchi was done, Quiet could have sworn the one who had been his nimble Voice looked a bit thinner. And that was after all the effort Quiet had gone through to make him gain weight!

"Better?" Gonchi asked, obviously proud of himself. The grin that Ave gave him couldn't be described in any manner other than...

"Hungry?" Quiet asked in turn.

"Starving."

"Hold it!" Gonchi held up a hand, his expression twisting in some kind of horrified realization. "You had an actual hole on your back. You weren't breathing right."

Ave cocked his head. "Yes?"

"And you have been jogging with me since we got here, but I've never-"

“Gonchi,” Ave interrupted him, slowly moving towards the door. “Can you run?”

The larger man blinked in bewilderment. “What kind of question is that? You’ve seen me, of course I can.”

Ave’s lips stretched into what could only be called a smirk. “Really? *I think not.*”

Then, he was out of the room in the next blink. One blink later, Gonchi had given chase.

It was far too late for an actual lunch, so he settled with a mug of cocoa and a jelly sandwich. Surely, he could keep at least half the sandwich down. He just had to keep going past the point his stomach gurgled. Ave was already on his third sandwich for crying out loud!

The mood was... tense. Borja practically had his own little stormcloud where he was sulking by the window (mission accomplished, Connie had burst out laughing when Quiet sent that little image to his head), nobody was looking at Cain at all and he was starting to suspect it was deliberate. Then Skeptic showed up (“*Harrier, or Harri, if you want,*” he heard, what did he mean ‘if he wanted’, that was his name. People deserved to have names).

Nando wasn't looking at Harri. In contrast, Ciro seemed committed to personally burning a hole through the sides of his head with laser vision. Harri wasn't necessarily avoiding either's gaze; instead, he looked to Quiet. Quiet looked down at his half-eaten sandwich and, recognizing he needed an excuse to be doing so, took a tiny bite. It was starting to taste like nothing. ~~The next time, it would taste even worse. He's so tired of eating.~~ He sharply looked back up, burying the unheeded thoughts. Harri was scanning the room. For what, Quiet didn't know, but he must've made some kind of assessment, because he looked towards Quiet again and nodded his head to the side.

...It took Quiet a second to realize his thread was being tugged.

(...curiosity?) (Intrigue?) (Urgency) need to talk.

Of course, he followed him, taking his plate with him. If he didn't, he'd definitely get concerned looks, even if Ave needed the nutrients more than he did. With nary a sound, Nando followed him. He could feel the others' eyes on him.

...wait, both Connie and Oii were following him. Looking to spread gossip around, he could guess. Cain too, stood up, and that caused Ave, Paco and Ciro to stand as well (Quiet put his plate back down). Only Ciro splintered from the group.

This was defeating the point of a private conversation. He could read that in Harri's expression after he left the room, turned around, and saw four more people than necessary.

Quiet shifted his weight from one foot to the other, “What did you want to talk about?”

His eyes were distant. Stuck thinking? Still in his head. Quiet could assume if he touched him, he'd be transported into Harri's mind room. That was wholly unpleasant when one wasn't expecting it. “I wanted to talk about the memories you have and we don't.”

Quiet tried not to react. Of course, it was going to come up one way or another. They deserved to know. Then why did it feel like he was on the edge of an abyss once more?

“Look at what happened last night,” Harri insisted, the keyholes that were his pupils contracted, “We have to know if something we’ll see in that game can affect you so badly.”

“He doesn’t *have* to tell you.” Connie interrupted. Quiet could feel him getting close.

“He doesn’t have to go back there either.” Nando backed him up.

For a moment, he was tempted to agree with them. To say no, he didn’t want to talk about it, might never be ready to talk about it. But they deserved to know, they had been with him every step of the way, even if they didn’t remember. They were the ones who had done everything. And who knows, maybe he’d be able to get some answers of his own, too.

There they went, to the dining room, and they took out the chairs from their places on the table. Most of the others had joined too, Felipe a glaring absence. The air hummed low, the tension over last night still hadn’t quite spilled over.

Oli just wanted a chance to tell the Decider what he had done, but having new information was good too! If only he had the certainty the others would stop teasing him over mixing up Tinkerbelle with Timberlake...

“No more secrets, right?” Quiet sat in his chair. His posture was all wrong, not how one would think a leader would carry himself. His back wasn’t straight, he wasn’t even looking at them in the eyes. Nervous. “I suppose it’s best to start with proof I’m telling the truth?”

For one single moment, Oli felt vindicated, because Quiet screwed them over, letting her walk behind them, but then...

Without looking at anyone else, Quiet took off his shirt, long-sleeved, like what most of them were wearing.

All thoughts flew from Oli’s head as he tried to process what he was seeing. There were scars everywhere, and they were... bad. Too many to count, to see- they all started overlapping. A tapestry of pain.

“Did you get cut in half?!” that was Nando, pale under his moles. There was a scar Oli could barely see, but it was there. A continuous, gnarled line in Quiet’s abdomen.

Quiet stared at him for a moment. Raised his hand to grasp something — Nando’s thread, maybe — then lowered it. “I didn’t get cut. I was bitten.”

Ave made some kind of sound Oli couldn’t identify. “No,” he begged, eyes wide. “*No.*”

Quiet looked away from him. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t fast enough. There was nothing we could have done.”

Oli thanked his lucky stars he didn't have to deal with whatever Ave had to. It sounded like Oli himself wouldn't have helped at all, if he were to hatch in that one, that animal that was big enough to do that to them. He was more of a words kind of guy, no direct confrontations needed. It was called self preservation!

Not that it seemed to have amounted to much, in the end, considering the state of Quiet's body.

Broken wrists, fracture lines down his arms. Bite marks. Oli remembered those, he should have those too, why didn't he? He pressed his teeth together to avoid saying anything.

His chest was a mess, Oli could see puncture wounds, some kind of tearing all along his front, and he saw shapes. And he forced his brain to not recognize those shapes. He was scared. He had been used to it, once, but what he was seeing went beyond his wildest and worst imaginings.

He startled when the sweatpants followed suit, that really was not necessary, they understood enough, there were many, many chapters--

One of his ankles was oddly shaped, that was the first thing Oli could focus on. The bone that protruded wasn't smooth, like it had been shattered to pieces and healed wrong. There were bite marks as well. And there, on the inner thighs — the thought escaped his hands before he could bury it — were handprints, impossible to ignore.

He wanted to vomit. He wanted to cry.

"You're cold," Connie pointed out when Quiet shivered, voice on the edge of wavering. "Get dressed again, you could— you could get sick."

He did, as quick as he could. Oli had to accept that he wouldn't want anyone ogling him when he was exposed like that. He couldn't keep looking at his chest. He couldn't look at his legs, his inner thighs, it burned his eyes to look.

"What were your questions?" Quiet asked, in the middle of trying to shove his head past the (wrong) hole of the shirt, changing courses.

The others, Oli included, turned to stare at Harri.

"What...?" Harri said in the tone of a man who's breached the surface tension of an ocean after spending too long underwater. Had he actually not been paying attention? Connie already looked like he wanted to riot.

After a moment, Harri composed himself, pushing up his glasses. Took a moment to take a deep breath. "How did you get these scars, and how did we *not* get these scars?"

Quiet looked at them with that horrible expression, something worse than guilt. "You know we had to deal with Princesses to get here, and that's how you all got your scars. What you don't know is that it wasn't my first time doing it. The chapter threes and beyond you never lived. I did."

That only gave Oli more questions. He wasn't very well-versed in fantasy, Quiet and Nando liked to read on that, he was a more grounded kind of guy. All Oli understood was that he was lucky he had only hatched twice that he could remember.

"Who did this to you, who was with you when it happened, who helped?" rapid-fire questions from the one persona non-grata of them.

Quiet blinked. "I thought that was clear? The Princess did this. Who was with me... it varied, I mean, you saw it already, but... Nando. Always him." and he looked at him with something in his eyes that made Oli want to look away. Like he was interrupting a private moment.

"Where was it? The woods, the cabin?"

Quiet took a deep breath. Released it. "We were in a... let's call it a construct."

From the corner of his eye, Oli saw Gonchi leaning over to whisper to Harri, "what's that mean?"

"Something man-made." Harri whispered back. Then, louder, "someone made it, then. Who?"

"It was Him." Honestly, Oli had been thinking that too. There was nobody else there aside from the girls. "To contain us."

"Why?" It was like watching a ping pong match. Question, answer, question, answer. Barely a moment to think of anything else to say. Barely a moment for anyone else in the group to have a word.

Quiet's eyes roamed the room, checking for something. Oli mirrored him. They were all seated, all hanging onto his words. The mark of a good storyteller, if the subject hadn't been obviously something said storyteller didn't want to talk about. "Because of what She is. What I am."

Oli could hear the capital letter, but it was the second sentence that sent his thoughts spinning, "You mean..?"

Quiet nodded. "The thing in the dark is the Shifting Mound-"

"Salud!" Connie said at once, as though he had sneezed. Quiet looked half like he wanted to reproach him, half was trying not to smile. Sometimes, Oli thought Connie was an idiot. Other times, like this one, he was glad for the joke.

"-or Transformation, you could say. And I'm a god, like Her."

The tone was all wrong. Like Quiet didn't believe it himself, like it was a false title. But Oli had seen some of the things he could do, that they all could do. If that was not a god, then what was? It sure was lucky that Oli had thrown in his lot with Quiet, now that he knew.

"*You?*" Borja spoke up for the first time.

“I don’t like your tone...” *Ciro* grinned. With *teeth*.

“Yes, me? You guys too, I think. Technically.” *Quiet* tried to smile. He didn’t quite succeed. *Borja’s* tone had completely gone over his head. See, this was one of those moments *Oli* would tug on his thread and make him aware of the disrespect, but he didn’t think he should, not now.

Oli’s heart was pounding. He could not let this devolve into another fight so soon. “A god. I always knew I was special.”

“You are special,” *Quiet* said simply, “I’d even say unique.”

Before *Oli* could ever start basking in the compliment, *Quiet* continued. “I had... a task, let’s say, that I needed to do. That’s why I was made: to rid the world of death.”

“What?” *Ciro* frowned. *Oli* couldn’t blame him, he was still trying to process the thing with being gods and there was now another thing to take into account. Wasn’t death a pretty important thing? A last resource to take down people who could hurt them?

“Within Her multitudes, She also had death as a concept. The actual thing. Destroying Her destroys it, and with it, His ideas of fear and suffering. Am- Am I going too fast?” *Quiet* blinked, looking at each of them.

In *Oli’s* opinion, he was going fast enough. Maybe a bit too fast for him. The subject matter was a bit too complicated. He looked around the room — was *Gonchi* understanding at all? He’d have to compare notes later.

“Who cares about death? I’ve died plenty of times and I’m fine!” *Gonchi* waved him off. *Cain*, of all people, hummed his agreement.

“If death isn’t so bad, then why am I here?!” *Paco* bristled, eyes unnervingly wide.

“Death is something to avoid, but the body keeps the score, as we all learned,” *Ave* said. *Oli* noticed *Paco* wilting slightly.

“Death is bullshit is what it is! Too easy and too painful to die, with how shitty our luck is!” *Ciro* completed the trio.

“You’re missing the point,” *Quiet* raised his eyebrows. “It’s not the experience of death He was afraid of, it’s the permanence of it. Once you die, truly die, that’s it. And that’s what He wanted to avoid. His world would face destruction, and He did what he thought was right.”

“But that’s not fair! We didn’t die-die, but it still really hurts! We had no time for breaks, no moment to stop!”

Connie blinked. “The world seems fine to me.”

Quiet shook his head, “That didn’t matter to Him. He told me He’d gladly put two infinite beings through what we’d been through to save infinite lives from oblivion. Needs of the many, right?”

Nando stared in open concern.

Harri frowned so deeply he seemed to have holes when the light didn't hit. "All that doesn't tell me anything! What was His plan, how did He do all that. Unless-" he sat up straighter, thirsty for knowledge, "Was He a god, too? Why haven't we seen Him here?"

Quiet flinched in his seat, taking a particularly shaky breath. "No, he was nothing like us. He was painfully mortal. I couldn't-- He's gone."

Harri's eyes widened, taken aback. "...I don't know how to feel."

"YES!" At once, everyone turned to look at Paco of all people, who looked like his birthday had come early (they'd have to look into that later). "Oh, come on, the itch in the back of our head is gone! No more strings, no more lies, forever! He'll never haunt us again! Oh, that's good to hear!" He smiled.

"At least He won't try to put us in danger anymore." Ave muttered.

Oli himself felt kind of sad about it.

"Good riddance." Gonchi said, something echoed by Borja and Cain.

"That still sounds insane," Harri muttered to himself. "Okay, so this construct... how did it... work?"

Quiet already had the answer prepared. "The construct we were in existed in many places at once. Any time I failed, any time I thought ourselves dead, it would restart and shunt our consciousness into another world."

That explained the many Princesses, the chapter 3s. It was almost too much for Oli to comprehend.

"How are we a god? Were we always one?" Harri nearly stumbled verbally over himself. "I mean, were you?"

"The Narrator tore us in two," Quiet explained, and Oli could see Ave and Ciro flinch. "Before being us, we were the cycle of life and death. The endless pattern of creation and destruction. He tore it in two and shaped the fraying threads into me and Her."

"Twins?" Paco wondered.

If that was the case then only one of the 'twins' had gotten good looks, and it obviously wasn't Her.

Quiet laughed without humor, "That wasn't something She was interested in, no."

Harri was practically vibrating with eagerness. No point wondering what part of this he wanted to know more of. "Tell me about this Transformation."

Quiet's slight grin fell, and he hid his eyes from view.

“You don’t have to tell us anything you don’t want to.” Nando interjected. “Don’t look at me like that, Harri. We don’t know what he’s been through.”

“You met Her?” Gonchi asked, smiling, “Did you fight Her? Any of my moves put to use?”

“It wasn’t a fight, Gonchi,” Quiet sighed, “Not even a battle of wits, Oli. She wasn’t interested in compromising, or in changing Her mind in the slightest.”

Oli blinked and sat back on his chair, he hadn’t even started to open his mouth!

“After He shattered... She did say the rest of the Princesses would find their way back to her by gravity, all pulled into one great mass that continued to pull in everything else.” Quiet gesticulated wildly, trying to get his point across.

“Was She trying to escape the construct?” Paco asked.

Quiet shook his head. “No, trying to reach me. She broke through the first layer of me, like a tidal wave. I think I might’ve blacked out for a moment?”

Oli abruptly stopped listening. Because he knew, he *knew* what Quiet was referring to. For a moment, he did. Then he slammed the door shut on that thought. Kept listening.

“She’s a mountain of Princesses, all reaching to the same body. I think. It was like looking at the sun’s pupil.” Quiet recalled, and Oli tried to imagine it. He couldn’t. “I had... a lot of questions-”

“Of course you did,” Harri said.

“She doesn’t like when I ask questions, is all. Every time I asked one, or made an argument for why ending the world wasn’t something I wanted, she...” Quiet fumbled with his words. “It was less an answer and more of making me relive all that happened to me, from Her perspective too.”

Ave winced. Ciro hissed in sympathy. Oli rubbed his own back. Breaking it had hurt. it was one of the reasons he insisted his room had no stairs near.

“If there was one thing I didn’t need to hear, it was the Razor sprouting poetry about how killing me was good, actually.” Quiet grumbled to himself.

“SHE WHAT?!” If this kept going, Hurricane Ciro would leave no survivors.

Oli turned his gaze away from him in case Ciro decided to make him the first casualty. He gritted his teeth. The bladed one was a humbling experience, someone who not only was convinced enough of what she wanted, but she didn’t even let him talk.

“She went back under the tides soon enough,” Quiet reassured him. Tried to. “We argued, and we argued, until I just... couldn’t.”

“You couldn’t have done it on your own forever,” Nando said. Like he knew something the others didn’t.

"I'm sorry, it was my fault," Quiet lifted his head up to look at him. Oli couldn't read him, he didn't know what that emotion was, other than 'fragile'. "I wasn't patient enough."

Whatever reassurances Nando was about to say died a quick death. Oli saw his eyes widen, posture like he was about to stand up, "What?"

"She would never change her mind," Quiet looked back down. "She wouldn't let me leave, so... I took Her offer."

Absolutely uncompromising, wasn't She? It was a strange feeling, but for a moment, he was almost proud. Recognizing the threat for what it was, making himself useful? It was better than any plan Oli'd come up with, that was for sure. He had taught him well.

"What happened to you?" Ave asked, hesitant.

Quiet didn't answer for a moment too long. Oli wondered if he'd noticed he was shaking. "I guess the closest analogy is-- I was swallowed up, consumed. Remodeled into what She needed. The center and the borders of Her. The eyes to Perceive. Seamstress and Thread."

"Swallowed," Ave echoed, and said no more. Oli had no clue what to make of the faraway look in his eyes, but, well--the flighty one tended to focus on words like that.

Quiet kept describing. He dictated things Oli didn't sign up to hear. He didn't really need all these details, did he? Just the concept was enough. He couldn't really understand what Quiet was saying, anyway. Too... metaphysical, for a guy like him. All he could gather from the details was that it was painful. Agony. Caught between gentle hands that pried him from himself, whispering sweet nothings and hissing condemnations in the same breath, moving and still all at once. Something touching him, something filling him, making him feel sick. Nature abhorred a vacuum, and he was leaving more than himself behind. Awake and aware as they'd always been through each and every moment. Never alone.

Quiet was right to submit and surrender when he did, then, was all Oli kept thinking. As early as possible. If this was what She was like when She loved him, then it was a miracle She never hated him. He was glad, for a moment, that he was not in Quiet's shoes.

"I think I went-- numb, at some point," Quiet said, voice cracking, and Oli couldn't fault him for that, everyone had their limits. "But-- I always remembered, before long."

Oli wondered if being numb was a mercy. Surely, there must have been an exit somewhere. Quiet had found it, after all. He had escaped.

"I kept asking for you," Quiet gasped, and the blood in Oli's veins ran cold. "I just wanted to have you all with me, any of you."

Oli decided he didn't like looking at the expression on Quiet's face. It made his teeth clench uncomfortably in his mouth. Did something to his gut. He looked over, and, ah, Nando's expression was having not too dissimilar of an effect on him. He was not sure where to look.

"Where were we?" Someone asked. Oli should know who, but he'd never heard anyone use that tone of voice before. What was that emotion?

Nando choked. "Jumbled up, in--in Her."

Oli kept gritting his teeth. That was not an appropriate time to smile, so he wouldn't open his mouth. He just needed to keep listening. He tried not to think too hard about the fact that Nando answered that question. He saw Connie nodding and wondered why he was so out of the loop. That wasn't like him. He was supposed to know as much as possible about people.

"I couldn't close my-- I was always watching," Quiet interrupted himself. "I was watching, but I just couldn't see. There was too much to see."

"You couldn't catch a glimpse of us? Where we might've gone?"

"Either I was just tremendously unlucky, or She was hiding you from me on purpose. I don't know."

"Bullshit."

Oli felt inclined to agree.

Quiet risked a glance up to the crowd in the room. An expression crossed their face--some sick twist between serenity and need and something incomprehensible. "I missed you," he said with an undeniable air of authority Oli couldn't ignore. "I had to go back. I *had* to."

"You went back," Oli blinked, pausing to process, "you went back for *us*?"

"Of course." Oli preened, just a bit, then stopped before it showed on his face. It wasn't appropriate. He'd just gained favor with the group, he couldn't lose it so fast. "You're so much more important than I'll ever be."

Ah. Oli didn't feel like preening at *that*. He must not have schooled his expression fast enough, because Quiet added, "I *mean* it."

"Don't." Ciro blurted out nonsensically. Oli understood. Usually, compliments were nice to hear, but how Quiet talked about them, like they were worth their weight in blood and gold, like they were the most precious things in the world... it made something in his gut twist.

"He was wrong." Borja spoke up, unexpectedly. Frankly, Oli had forgotten he was there. And that was a feat considering how tall he was. "He put too much on your shoulders, with the purpose talk."

"Thank you!" Connie cheered, smiling like a miniature sun, "You get it!"

"You weren't made *for* anything," Borja continued, "You aren't a god, you're a person."

"Exactly!" Nando nodded empathically.

Oli wasn't so sure about that. Being a God had to come with benefits, and it would definitely mean being more powerful than other people. If nothing else, it meant another layer of protection. Surely others could see that!

"You didn't have to fight Her."

Oleander's train of thought derailed and crashed. He didn't think there were survivors. Borja couldn't be saying what he thought he was. Not after hearing the same thing they did.

"You didn't have to struggle. You only had to give in--that was the issue. You were holding onto responsibilities He had no right to push onto you. He didn't understand. He had no hope to understand. But," Borja inhaled, looking up to the skies, mouth still open--as if listening to the patterns of the rain. Fingers twitching, thrumming invisible strings. "But She could've shown you. Given you a *real* purpose."

"What the fuck is your problem?!" Ciro screeched, balling his fists. "He's not a toy, what the fuck kind of purpose-?!"

"He is." Borja said it like it was a fact. Like the sky was blue. The room went silent. "One She clearly enjoyed using, too. Things are only real when someone else is around to use them, and She clearly claimed that one."

Quiet's eyes were wide as he stared at him. He hadn't moved a muscle. Oli wasn't sure he could realize he was crying.

"Don't you see?" Borja said, his head falling down to look Quiet in the eyes, something fervent in his expression. Quiet, impossibly, grew stiller by the second. "You gave so much. To Her, and to us. It's how people like us pay tribute. And in return," he sighed, a delirium playing in the wind. "She loved you."

*(Consumption) (Betrayal) (Skepticism) (Blind devotion) (Rivalry) (Submission) (Terror)
(Longing) (Pain) (Unfamiliarity) AND AT THE CENTER OF IT ALL—*

The sound of a steel trap slamming shut.

Oleander stopped listening, shuddering as *far too much* began *rushing* through him with neither warning nor preamble. Visions that were not his own danced between his eyes, his head splitting open, his breath stuttering. The wind was knocked out of him from the force with which he closed the door. Its hinges rattled, but the thread stopped feeding him Quiet's bloodletting repository, so that would have to be enough.

Shakily, Oli removed his hands from the sides of his head.

The noise did not stop. Recovery of his auditory senses only led to harsher stimulation. Pandemonium around him. Quiet had all but doubled over, begging through sobs for mercy and peace and forgiveness—Paco stood in front of him, Nando and Connie to his hides, chanting in hushed breaths—screaming, to his left, he hadn't known Ciro's voice could get so shrill. His head spun as he flinched back, seeking—*back to the wall, she can't stab you if she can't get to*—but not finding where Borja'd been tossed. Where did Gonchi go?

"She tried," Quiet sobbed as he tried to make his words keep coming. "She tried to make me see—make me understand it was the only thing I was g-good for, but I wouldn't believe Her. I *c-couldn't*. But She, please, She-" he gagged. He was beyond sobbing, now.

The noise died down all at once, a *clap* sounding through the air as Ciro's trembling form vanished from the room and he, presumably, landed harshly in his own room. Quiet was choking too much to continue speaking. And, no matter how frantic, Paco's chants had never been the loudest.

Oli—swallowed.

Paused.

His train of thought slowly came back into commission. Oli continued not to move, even as Nando's hands approached, froze, and retracted from Quiet's peripherals. Even as they started back up again, apologizing for not understanding. (They shouldn't. They shouldn't understand. Borja shouldn't 'understand', either, even if Oli—)

Oli leaned into the wall again. All of a sudden, he knew with dead certainty that if he were there, he would've made it worse. And Oli- and Oli would've t-told Quiet to settle down and let it h- let- oh, *god-*

He slinked down the wall, just slightly. Continued not to move, because he has no right to. And there were twenty kilos of rocks in his stomach. And the force at which he was biting down was pinning his body to the floor. Because *Oli taught him this*.

He rose as the rest of the gang—or those that yet remained—crowded around Quiet... and slinked away, like the snake he was. He knew, even if Quiet didn't, that he wasn't one of them. That Oli was himself, and the others were themselves, and he couldn't help. He was—he was nothing, to them. And he was not sure how to explain that to Quiet, if he'd ever understand it. And as his feet moved, to get out of the room, something in his mind clicked.

"Vessel in reverse."

Oli was many things, and one of those things was a damn good listener. He noticed inflections, details, the things people didn't mean to say, but meant anyway. And he noticed Quiet say that he was nothing without Her. Nothing at all, in general. And he can never forget the way Quiet spoke about him--about all of them, as if they were the most precious things in the world. Worth their weight in gold and blood. (It was the worst compliment he had ever received.) Oli knew now. He found the information he needed.

Being the one with information was supposed to feel good. It was why he listened for it. But this? This?... No. He didn't want this, no thank you. Because he kind of wanted to throw up about it, really!

What kind of blackmail material was that?

That Quiet loved them? And hated himself? Oli had no clue what he could've possibly done to deserve the reverence Quiet held for him, but he had it. And he realized, now that was

granted, that he had to use it. Someone had to order around those fools until Quiet... got better, and... and, Nando would need someone to defer to. Need someone to— not defer to— what's the mushy word? Depend on.

He shuddered. He took a breath. He couldn't lose his composure, too; someone had to be the strong one. Oli could make himself that someone. Earn his keep. He took a second glance at the tears rolling down everyone's cheeks. Took a second to reach up and feel his own dry face. Took up the role of temporary leader. Took up some responsibility, to make himself useful before anyone found out he was not.

And then, after that was over, when he locked himself in his room, maybe he could... cry. Or vomit. Or scream. Or whatever it was that had been building in his throat all this time.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! This is a reminder that this fic has a discord!

<https://discord.gg/EqNQvpgJDT>

Chapter 13: Unpetrified

Chapter Summary

A talk with the Sun. Gods and prophets aren't the only ones keen to receive visions. Waking up in the night. The clock ticks forward. The rain falls harder. The pitter-patter on the rooftops lulls the indoor storms to quiet conversations, secrets not quite so well-kept.

Chapter Notes

Remember, there's a discord for this fic and we'd love to have you!
<https://discord.gg/EqNQvpjJDT>

Was told the names were confusing if they were at the end so here they are, at the beginning!

Broken - Borja
Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi/Gonzalito
Cold - Caín
Contrarian - Connie
Hunted - Avellano/Ave
Opportunist - Oleander/Oli
Paranoid - Paco/Paquito
Cheated - Ciro
Hero - Fernando/Nando
Smitten - Felipe/Feli
Prisoner - Tabi/Tabitha
Damsel - Dami/Damiana
Witch - Winnie/Winifred
Tower - Thelka
Adversary - Ava
Nightmare - Clara
Spectre - Grace
Stranger - Plethora

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

When Skep— *Harri* had practically called for a meeting, Borja had been trying, once again, to brave the storm outside to return to his rightful place. He was almost glad he had decided to wait, he had learned a lot from what transpired. Important things. Things that shouldn't

have been kept a secret in the first place. Things that were outright wrong, even! People had biases, and that had been clear as day.

Quiet, a god... Borja had never heard such blasphemy in all his existence.

Gods didn't cry, didn't give themselves up in offering for their worshippers. Gods didn't look upon their disciples with eyes equally as adoring as they were terrified—didn't flinch, *never* faltered... and they never, ever apologized. All qualities Quiet showed in spades. Not to mention the weakness displayed on their skin.

Not a person, not a deity. But still, Borja had waited for too long before his Goddess called for him instead of going of his own volition. Because the Decider told him to. Borja could have lost what mattered to him at the hands of something that thought itself a deity when in reality it was so insignificant.

It was, as Harri was fond of saying, elementary. It was the right of a god to take: therefore, it was the duty of the people to give. Quiet had even done as much when Borja was with him! Sure, he had needed persuasion, but the end justified the means a thousand times over!

Quiet didn't understand, not like Borja did, that She would surely make him return, so why go through all the trouble of getting away from Her? He would understand in time. Borja would make him understand.

He would understand, if he saw She was just giving him a purpose. He would. **He would.**

But for now, his attempts to spread the truth were met with disregard if not outright disdain, and that had gotten him kicked out of his homestead. Borja was not the type to instigate conflict, nor was he the type to size up his opponents—he simply knew, innately, that he had no chance of victory. Between the raw force that was Gonzalo and Ciro's verbal assault, that had been made doubly clear. The rain, in comparison, was a much cooler foe. At him, it launched neither profanities nor punches so hard he could hear something in his skull crack; only a cold, gentle, unyielding assault. Something he could grow familiar to the patterns of.

Still, there was something better than the rain out here.

He just had to make his way towards Her. Being careful of the water, trying to not let the current that wanted to go past his ankle drag him down the road. He almost lost his shoe, and had to run down a whole block to retrieve it lest it be swallowed by one of the rainpipes.

A pilgrimage to his goddess, trekking through the desert to find Her dwelling. Except it wasn't a desert because it was raining and that made it worse. It made his limbs turn into lead and his chest felt tight and for a moment he was drowning on air. He had not resisted, that time, because sensible people know resisting only makes it hurt more.

Regardless, drowning was not a peaceful way to go.

But he would not drown here. He just needed to proceed to the— Thelka's house. He needed to see Her. A sudden shock of anxiety ran through his chest—he'd been waiting a long time, lingering in these empty spaces, ignoring Her call. She wanted him to see Her. He *needed* to

see Her. He redoubled his pace through the rain despite how his breaths became shallower with each step.

Until he heard a *squelch* somewhere in front of him that he most definitely did not make.

First he saw eyes gleaming, irises an almost purple color over pale green scleras, round and black-lined and one wrong move from retaliation.

Their owner was walking in the same direction as him, covered in something dark and wetter, denser than the rain. Try as he might, he couldn't discern the color. Oh. It was the sharp one.

He leaned low to the ground. *Flee*, an instinct in his heart that reminded him of Ave urged, but Borja retorted that wouldn't work, not with her so close. *Fight*, came the feeling which must have overpowered Gonchi when he broke his nose, but Borja disregarded it as well. Fighting never worked. The spark within him died as fast as it lit.

Freezing, however...

Borja held his breath. The woman before him turned in all sorts of directions, as if looking for something she'd lost—or looking for something to find. Left, right, a couple steps forward this way or that before returning to the same center position. It seemed aimless. It seemed intentional. Borja wondered, irrationally, if she was looking for *him* as his pulse increased and he felt its speed, its volume, in his throat. A chill ran up his arms as a tickle formed at the back of his neck, but he would not move. He would not.

And then—seemingly out of nowhere—he spotted *eyes* in the dark of the rain. Shining. Staring. He shivered, and she approached; the chimera.

She seemed to flicker between her normal, mismatched form and a creature that towered over all like some sort of ancient monument.

'Why don't you come closer?' her patient eyes seemed to say. *'Surely, I couldn't reach you.'*

As if sensing those eyes opening, the Razor turned around in a fluid motion, looking straight at him. Intentional, then. Looking for someone. Singleminded she might have been at the cabin, but she was not stupid.

“I was looking for a mortal, but I guess I've caught a Prince.” She smiled, words grating together and yet somehow as sharp as knives. Satisfaction carved on her face, something like gleeful madness sparking in her eyes.

Something sweeter graced the air, enticing and hypnotic. Dangerous.

'Go on,' it cooed. *'Do something. Come on, let's dance.'*

‘Laying low’ was not an option anymore. In response to the electricity in the air, Borja could only feel his own energy being drained out of him—a sudden sense of helplessness taking its place. It didn't work before, but maybe it'd work now. He raised his hands above his head and fell into a full bow at her feet. This time, the surrender *was* unconditional.

Borja closed his eyes and believed. *The problem was the Decider. The problem was the Decider. The problem was...*

The Razor pouted. “Don’t bother, Beastie, that one isn’t fun at all.” A blade, slick with something dark, almost clipping his ear. Borja didn’t move. “Not that I have any issues with you, personally, though! You’re just boring and lame and don’t do much. Plus, Thelka wouldn’t be happy and I don’t really want to deal with that.”

Yes, those were his Goddess’... companions? Gods didn’t do ‘friends’. Maybe... *wait*.

“Her Grace... still sees fit to keep Her claim?” Borja’s voice was trembling. The rain did more damage than he thought he did—but most things tend to, at the end of the day. That had been his purpose; to sustain damage. He swallowed. His mouth was dry. It seemed impossible, with all the rain.

“Hm, I don’t know... Maybe! Let’s find out!”

Borja very carefully didn’t look at the sharp one’s bloodstained clothes, at the chimera’s bloody two rows of fangs. He was getting to his destination, wasn’t that all that mattered?

Dami had been about to follow her sister, offering moral support while Tabi said something to Plethora. It was like last night had not happened: how nobody except them were wary of Clara; how, Tabi explained, sometimes not saying anything was as bad as saying the wrong thing; how it was all rubbing her the wrong way. But the situation had changed.

Damiana stared at Borja, at the way he gingerly moved, as though in pain, and wondered what happened. Wondered if he’d let her help, after he talked with Thelka. Wondered if he’d let her help *with* Thelka.

Maybe he would let her. Maybe she could do something about it. Maybe she just didn’t want to think about last night. Not just about Clara and the way the her on the screen had been, or how the boys had felt the need to drug some of the others to feel safe enough to leave, or how her boyfriend hadn’t asked about them even once.

How Damiana woke up in the middle of the night with a cut off scream, leftover fear making shadows dance like flames. Darkness pressed down on her chest, heavy and relentless. Felipe had taken the other sofa in the living room, the one Beast wasn’t occupying. Tabi, next to her, silently opened her eyes.

Dami was about to lie down and attempt to get back to sleep when she saw something black peeking out from under her duvet. She lifted it up to expose it.

There were scorch marks on her sheets. She remembered gripping them when she woke up.

Remembered someone's face, in the dream, burned.

(She could have set the bed on fire. She could have set the bed on fire. She could have *burned her sister* in the bed on fire. She—)

She went to get a glass of water below. And dared disturb Thelka from her rest, now that she discovered she could sleep and, coincidentally, sleeping did feel nice.

It wasn't like she wasn't aware of the others'... power leaking, she supposed she could call it, but neither Tabitha nor her had anything of the sort happen to them until then.

Thelka said a lot of things Damiana processed more or less accurately, but it really boiled down to: that power was one that needed an outlet. Take Ava, for example: a bleeding cut, a twisted wrist, a bad fall- none of those bothered her, for her body mended itself nearly instantly in response.

But if that power did not have any wound to heal, well. It would find other ways out of her body.

"You're lucky," Dami heard Razor tell Winnie once when finally, finally her nosebleed stopped (oh God, the sink had looked like a crime scene), "an overproduction of blood is easy. You're all planty, and plants grow. Imagine you had your ribs overgrow and curl inward! Until they pierce your lungs!"

What Razor had to have meant by that was *it could be much worse. It's going to be okay!* But what Damiana heard was: *you need to give this power an outlet or you WILL suffer from it.*

Like Winnie had tried to do, then it grew from more blood than necessary to plants growing in her skin. Seeing the what-could-have-been on the screen answered the 'why' of that particular downside, at least.

...She guessed the fire was how it manifested for her.

Ave was standing guard again. It was just until Quiet washed his face, but he couldn't risk it. He knew Quiet didn't see himself as worthy of protection, but there had to be something else he could do. Some way to atone from the way all of them had catastrophically failed in their purpose, duty, need. Prey wasn't supposed to excuse the predator for what they did, even moreso when they played with their food.

It wasn't like he had any hope to win against Her, Ave knew that, but it didn't make it hurt any less. He vaguely remembered when he was still a Voice. The sky bursting open, neither gently nor softly, but like a body breaking.

Why had Ave not gone to help, how had he not awakened that first time, when Quiet was chipping away at his chrysalids? A fledgling on the cusp of getting his flight wings, not knowing still how to fly, face to face with danger. He felt like—

Like—

Ave remembered unfolding.

He remembered something pouring into his veins, filling everything like a river bursting from its banks. Remembered it swirling in currents strong enough to sweep him off his feet...and

then getting *stronger*.

The flock had called ‘hatching’ when they first stirred into aware consciousness. If each of them had been inside an egg, then there had been a shell between them and the world. A barrier. Strong and fragile all the same.

And, of an egg, Hunted was to be the yolk. The nourishment for Her, that which was implanted into the egg. Feeding on him, all of him becoming Her, until She broke from what used to be him. Her, hatching from the egg shell of his corpse, like he, at some point in the distant past, had hatched from Quiet. What became of him was not natural, was not birth, was not welcome. It was the defilement and corruption of a preexisting life.

There was no beauty there. No poetry. Just the raw writhing of water finding or making cracks in the shells. Pounding against the eggs as if to punish them for being barriers.

There was no tenderness. It wasn’t about grace or purpose, but about hunger and surrender, the weight of billions of impacts stripping the world bare. And something in Hunted loosened against his will, unraveling in the rhythm, in the relentless burning that reminded him of his own first breaking, of the times he couldn’t stop failing. Something building like a tide until it was pushing him into itself, seeping inside of him through hairline cracks in his being that flaked, that crumbled under the strain, taking pieces of him with it until the whole of *him*, no longer him, had been swept free of his shell and washed away by the tides.

The corruption of a hatching. The shell cracked, and he cracked with it, letting it flood him, letting it drench everything he thought was safe.

That had been how She hunted. Thinning out the pack and leaving one alive to play with. No more, they had been alone before, that was how She had been able to get them. No more. They would run to the ends of the worlds if they had to.

Damiana wasn’t even surprised to see Winnie eavesdropping from behind the door of Thelka’s room. What she was somewhat surprised by was Tabi doing the exact same thing, one of her hands carefully trying to pluck developing blossoms from Winnie’s arm as painlessly as possible.

Her sister smiled sardonically when she saw her, gesturing to the door with her head. “You might as well.”

Dami tried not to smile in response. She couldn’t. Dami crept behind the door, only allowing herself enough viewing room to see the situation.

Thelka leaned in, her face only centimeters from Borja’s as she spoke in a low, honeyed voice. “You don’t doubt me, do you, little bird?” The words slipped from her lips with an unnerving calm, but there was a quiet pressure in them—an unspoken challenge. “Because I can see it. I can see when you start to question me, when you wonder if I’m *truly* here for you.”

The younger man blinked, caught off guard. Frowned, just a little.

“You think I would abandon you, don’t you?” Thelka continued, her voice almost affectionate now, like she was speaking to a child who had just made a terrible mistake. “You think that, with all the things we’ve seen, I would *punish* my own priest for something he didn’t instigate?”

“I don’t think that, Your Radiance,” Borja’s voice was stronger than Damiana had expected, staring at her head-on. “I came bearing news. You see…” he trailed off, waited for an interruption that didn’t happen. “You see, I was trying to get one of the others to see the light.”

Thelka shifted on her seat, her eyes alight with interest.

“It pains me to say that You are not the only Goddess they encountered. The thing in the dark-”

“A deluded, if powerful force of nature,” Thelka summarized, and Dami choked on her retort. How could she be so calm?! “Is that the one who would claim the shard of ice?”

Borja shook his head. “One of them’s been lying. The reason we’re all here is their attempts to leave their fate, and Her, behind.”

Dami looked back at the others. Tabi had a hand over her mouth, her expression conveying how she dearly wanted to say something that wasn’t very polite.

Behind her, Winnie’s throat bobbed up and down, staring daggers at Borja, a small flower growing over her brow as she mouthed, “that *bitch*.”

“That’s… unacceptable.”

“Of course it is,” Borja breathed the words as though they were being drawn from him. “It is inconceivable that they would reject their destiny. It— She was nothing if not patient with them, of this I am certain despite their attempts to dissuade us and delude themselves further.”

Borja continued, spilling secrets as though they were of no worth at all. Dami got the impression that she was hearing something she was not allowed to know. And yet Borja’s voice retained a certain allure, speaking in mumbled and muted passions, with an air of authority she’d never before heard in his tone. It was like he became a different person altogether. He lectured as though he had the answers, and Dami needed only ask questions. But Dami did not think, from the things Borja was saying, she’d had the right to ask. Not from the talk of unraveling, not from the horrific visions spoken of in the tone of miracles and natural wonders. He spoke of horrors beyond comprehension the way Dami heard Tabi talk about stars and constellations. Said “relentless” and “uncompromising” like they were compliments.

“It was wrong of them, to reject a goddess who would love them unconditionally if only he would do his duty and pledge himself to her as I to you,” Borja finished, and Dami shuddered. There, at least, she could understand. He was not wrong. He inhaled sharply, then, like he had only just realized a mistake he’d made. It was the kind of gasp Dami would make

if she'd stepped on a friend's shoes, just sharper. Harsher. More afraid. "Not that I would expect such a blessing from you, your Grace."

There was an allure, to be loved and to be known, to be cherished and adored, and it was a gift Dami never thought one had a right to reject. It's how you become happy, isn't it? But the person Borja spoke of did not sound happy. Thelka hummed, the electricity coursing through the air in waves aligned with the vocalizations in her throat, the kinetic force pushing through Dami for a moment. It was a loud voice. It was a dominant voice. Dami felt... soothed.

She watched as Thelka leaned down to the man. Wrapped one arm around his back and shoulders, pulling him into her hold, as the other was gently placed on his head. Her palm moved in circles, caressing his head as her fingers dug into his scalp. His head fell forward into her hands, receptive. "My priest," she cooed, her voice low and intentional in its direction, and Dami shook off whatever it was that overcame her for a moment. "My pet."

Dami felt like she'd been splashed with ice cold water. Couldn't believe what she'd heard. She must have misheard, she decided, in the split second it took for Thelka to continue.

"You are a good disciple," Thelka said, and Dami heard the way she drew out her words. Cooing. Singing.

She needed... to help. Get to Borja alone somehow. People weren't pets. She started, raising from where she'd crouched behind the door, only to feel a clenched hand on her shoulder. She turned, startled, to see Winnie frantically shaking her head. "Not now," she hissed at her. "They'll know we're listening!"

No, Dami thought, sudden and forceful and aghast. She couldn't wait, couldn't be scared. Her friend needed her! She shook her head at Winnie, and Winnie's tail lashed behind her as the hold on Dami's shoulder became tighter. Dami looked to Tabi for support. Her sister looked frozen, expression too complex to name. Mumbling silently to herself. Then she, too, shook her head at Dami. "Later," she mouthed clearly so Dami could read her lips, silent, watching. "Too risky."

"Why?" Dami hissed back. Tabi again shook her head, more gently, and pulled Winnie away from holding her back.

Behind the closed door, Thelka spoke. "You have suffered well in my absence... look at what they have done to you. It is heathenism. Do not worry. I will fix you a worship ground, here, to rest as I restore you. You need not return to those that wish to lead you astray. You will be a good bird. My good bird."

"*Yours.*" Dami nearly hadn't caught that single word, hushed as it was.

"I own you. You are mine and mine alone. No one has the right to touch you but me."

"Yes; as you say. Yours and yours alone."

"No one will take you. You are open to none but me."

“Yes; as you want. Open only to you.”

“Your heart is mine to take.”

“Yes. My heart is yours.”

“Your mind is mine to change.”

“Yes. My mind is yours.”

“Your spirit is mine to break.”

“Yes. My spirit is yours.”

The echo was sickening. Despite herself, Dami leaned closer and closer to the door with each call and response. Resisting was impossible; there was a black hole behind that door, pulling her in. It was like they kept getting quieter, in solitude, in secrecy. Not for the next call; the pair returned to speaking volume, then, the change almost booming in comparison to their prayer.

“You are mine.”

“Yes; as your right. I am yours. To command. To take, to change, to break. All of it. Always.”

“As pledged?”

“As pledged.”

“Good bird.” Dami returned to her place behind the door just in time to see Thelka ruffle her disciple’s hair, and for him to rise and begin walking away towards the door. Towards Dami. And for her, flinching back, to throw a fleeting glance in Thelka’s direction—and, impossibly, make direct eye contact, a serene and amused smile on her face.

Winnie hastily retreated, Tabi following on her heels. Dami stood rooted to the spot, waiting for Borja to open the door. He did a double take when he saw her there, gaze somewhere between chastising and confused.

“Were you...?”

Dami could have asked ‘why did you tell her that?’, could have asked ‘are the others okay?’, could have asked ‘you know you’re not a pet, right?’

“Are you okay?” was what came out of her mouth instead.

Borja’s whole posture relaxed, smiling slightly. It reached his eye, even. “You are very kind, but I’m okay. Never better, truly.”

The thing was, “you’re bleeding.”

Borja blinked as he touched his lip gingerly, a bit surprised. “...ah.”

Nando had never put much thought in how he was always the First voice Quiet had, in all the loops. Never truly stopped to think how Nando was the one who knew him the most, how he was a little bit more like Quiet than the others, in the way Nando was a little more himself than others were.

Maybe, he should have thought of that. Maybe that way the dream he had wouldn't have caught him so off guard, maybe he would have decided already whether to tell Quiet or to keep it to himself.

He was already telling Connie, grip tight around the steaming mug someone had poured from him. Quiet had gone off to wash his face. And the words had just... started coming.

He had been worried sick for Quiet, even after he had fallen asleep, so nightmares were something to be expected. He doubted it was a mere dream, however.

For starters, he was back in the Ocean. Not submerged beneath, not feeling bones creak from the force of the tides, but above it. Soaring. But the waves weren't of water. Between one blink and the next, they changed back and forth, from water into... something else.

Bodies.

Water, the currents ebbing and flowing and forming whirlpools and foam. Bodies upon bodies upon bodies, hands reaching for him, hands to take. One in particular grabbing his ankle with enough force to almost break the bone, pulling him under, coiling around him. His head above water, just barely. Couldn't move, the currents, so many hands, prevented it. It was so cold.

Some of the water— for a lack of a better descriptor— rising, shaping itself. He could see the dark world behind it (feathers?) like distorted glass. Then he blinked again.

From the peak of the hill emerged a vast mound of several bodies— far too many pairs of eyes, each shining but utterly empty on their own. Eyes of porcelain dolls. Marbles painted over.

Then came the arms like an ant's feelers reaching out towards the sky. Dozens, hundreds, thousands, moving nonstop. Nando could feel the rhythm of the tides on his own skin. He struggled against it, in vain.

And then, Her.

She crawled out of the torn threads, climbing the mound made of Her own husks until She reached its peak.

At first, six pairs of arms emerged from a chrysalis made of pale hair, before the chrysalis gradually unraveled into a legless torso held up and worshipped by the husks below. And then, five heads unveiled from that pale hair. Two facing away, two partially sideways, and one looking straight ahead.

No different from each of the husks— the same hair, the same body type and skin, the same face, the same eyes, the same voice— and yet. It was all *off*.

Arms that always reached out, not in the way a person would to grab or hold something, more akin to how a bird puffed its feathers to intimidate others, or a spider held its legs up to strike its prey down. Hands that looked gentle, yet never hesitating to close into fists at the first opportunity. A disarming smile concealing unkind words, not reflected in kind at times by the husks. Eyes with a light not unlike Nando would imagine looking up to the moon in the sky from the depths of a well, cool pale gaze lacking any of the warmth he was familiar with from the living people he knew.

Knowing what he knew now, and even before then— he did not need to hear what Quiet had been made to say to realize this goddess wasn't one he ever wanted to worship.

The Shifting Mound— and what a pretentious, obnoxious title— held Herself the way Thelka did: like She was the most powerful being in the room.

It was not an obvious thing, as most powerful beings didn't need to portray their power like a neon sign. But Nando had seen Oli trying to straighten his back, had heard him talk. So he saw it in the straight line of Her shoulders and the upright curve of Her spines, in the fold of Her fingers curled neither too loose nor too tense. Just like Thelka, the Shifting Mound set Nando's blood to a quiet boil the moment he laid eyes on Her.

Nando could even see some "Vessels" he didn't recognize held within Her multitudes, appearing strikingly similar to the drawn art of the impossibility they'd been forced to play. Held close and carefully, in loose grasps, with indifference, far too tight. All of them with covered eyes. Nando felt palms on the sides of his head, seeking to shield him from the light — from needing to see through any eyes but Hers. He shook rapidly, and they fell away.

That being, the one who had shattered him and had Quiet at Her mercy. All because Nando couldn't be quick enough. The thought had gotten stuck somewhere in his mind: what had he done?

What had She done?

There was no depth to what he was seeing, barely shadows. What was he looking at? He blinked again.

The mask shattered. A million tiny seams in the forms of each and every body unfurled. What did not open up to blood and viscera, thousands of gurgling stomachs and millions of glossy eyes and incomprehensibly many pulsing hearts, opened to reveal it was no more than the fleeting image of shadows cast by hand puppets, a play of light and shadow. Hands frantically grasped and pulled at fleshy, clotting threads of nerves and sinew. A mockery of the threads Quiet had. An ocean of blood.

A hold that just a moment ago was cold and numb and devoid of sensation turned blistering and slick and overstimulating. Nando *writhed*, and She writhed with him. There was no tidal wave, no pattern, no ebb and flow, just the chaotic motion of organic material.

What Nando could identify as the main body had changed its shape. The six arms that once sprouted from humanlike torsos had ripped open, skin tearing, popping, and exploding from the force of what was trapped inside finally bursting free. And what was inside wasn't bones, pink with blood and recognizable by their shapes. It was thin and silvery, grasping at threads to— *needles*. They were their own paradox, grey and lifeless on their own among all the warmth and red. They moved as one, in waves, catching on the great sea of red and reeling in what it hooked, changing its shape into what it would weave.

What they hooked was not red.

It was dark, the color of glass. Long tendrils peeled out from the mass of desecrated carcasses, their ends fraying into sand and ash. Making the tear that much wider. There was no definite end to them, too frayed for it. There was a word to describe those dark tendrils, Nando recognized them for ~~who~~ what they were, but then the needles pierced each one and Nando couldn't identify them at all. Wouldn't.

She was... making... something. Forcing the tendrils to accommodate to one shape. Twisting them among each other. Knitting.

His heart hurt in his chest. Nando wouldn't be too slow again, he was right there, he was *right there*, if he could just— *reach forward* and help—

The main body moved, gliding almost, towards him. He was being lifted, then, still embraced by the scent of death all around him, but separated from the mass. Presented to Her like an offering.

His blood had entered a flash boil, his mind on the first stages of frigid. Talking would usually be his first instinct, make Her see with even one of those uncountable number of eyes that She was hurting the one who those threads belonged to. But She wasn't interested in talking, was She?

She reached forward, towards his chest. Fingers hot like molten metal and cold like death dragged claws against him. Nando grit his teeth.

And blinked.

And saw Her.

A Majesty who saw Herself as Everything. An all-consuming flame that demanded to be fed, not to offer warmth to the one feeding it, but to continue growing and spreading its influence wherever it went. Like staring into the Sun's pupil.

She was many, and She was one. She was together, and She was alone.

Pressure mounted on his shoulders, in his head, throughout his chest. Feelings not his own flooded through him. *Frustration*. '*You are hiding the contours of his heart from Me.*'

Rage. Cold spite. Nando glared into the Sun. She smiled. Her eyes on eyes on eyes made contact with his own, but were not looking at him at all. They bore through him like

sunbeams, radiant and radioactive and ripping through him, trying to find access to his shadow behind through sheer force.

The pressure increased. Pain splintered across his whole body. Everything hurt. *'You struggle against what you cannot understand. What makes a shriveling little worm think it could deny Contrast Itself?'*

Clarity. An overwhelming impulse. A mouth quicker than his mind— thoughts quicker than his sense. 'I already did.'

Trillions of hearts synchronized into a single heartbeat. Then, a nuclear explosion as each ran out of sync yet pounded in unison. Hands clawed into his chest—blood filled his lungs—metal pierced and flayed him alive—unwound, deconstructed, emptied—a prying force, loud and agonizing and *angry—a need to lash out.*

The end of the pain was almost enough for shock to creep in. Almost.

A blink. The needles stopped. Nando tried to put them out of his mind. He was starting to shake. He needed to breathe.

Another blink. Something had changed once more. She was no longer scantily clad in only Her own strands of hair, but adorned in sickeningly familiar bloodstained *threads* — *woven into* a form fitting layered dress of dark *feathers*, stained red with blood and bound together with her pristine hair.

They wrapped around Her neck and shoulders in a diamond shape, partially exposing Her chest but covering up the rest. Feathers and strands were arranged similarly to the dresses brides would wear in Feli's telenovelas, simple and subtle ruffles of feathers lining the curved shape of Her body.

Blank husks clung to the hem of the dark feathered dress, pretty-pale hands reaching up to pet loose strands that glistened red, starkly contrasting with Her unblemished complexion as She smugly stared down at him. It was grotesque. It was disgusting.

Seeing him come to his senses, She did a twirl in Her new dress, showing it across infinite sides and infinite angles. She laughed, mirthful and cruel, as it swayed with the movement, as She danced on Her own with pieces of him to keep Her company, as She made Nando watch. It conformed to Her near perfectly. Defined Her form so snugly. It felt like with every movement She made, the feathers trembled in fear and the strands tightened around them.

It made Nando sick to his stomach. He suspected it was supposed to be some sort of show of affection towards Quiet, but two words burned clearly into him in its place. *Obsession. Need.* She wouldn't let go of him for as long as She existed. It said everything that She would wear the suffering She inflicted on him as something to cherish rather than to be ashamed of.

He swallowed the burning of his revulsion and tried his best to push away from Her, to look away from the display She put on for him. 'He doesn't want to see you.'

A twitch from one of Her faces. A sunspot. He hit a nerve. *'He already has.'* A distant look, an inhuman grin. The break of dawn at midnight. *'Just as I have seen him. Beautiful and adored and everlasting. Unlike you.'*

Nando opened his mouth. His voice was scratchy and tired and raw. But above all that, it was scoffing. “‘Adored’?” And deities weren’t the only beings that could speak truth. “You hurt him.”

A gross understatement. *'His suffering was an impermanent means to a beautiful end. Our union ascended past the petty, fickle concerns of pain or death.'* A deep sigh. *Longing. 'It was how things are meant to be.'*

“You’re wrong.”

'And you are no 'you' at all. A delusion that stole away a piece of a soul and convinced itself it was more.' A sudden force pushed against Nando’s will. The impressions She made on him were harsh and pressuring and *loud*, words red and burning and laced in blood. A lingering threat to shatter him where he stood. And then—release. *'But I do not need to break you. You shall fade with the inevitable passage of time. I only need wait for him to reprise the steps to our dance.'*

“He won’t.”

'He knows the consequences of trying to keep me trapped for eternity. The things it would do to us both. But it doesn't have to be so terrible. In a world with both of us, nothing has to last forever.'

“He doesn’t **want** to see you.” He repeated aloud. “He made his choice,” a small part of him wanted to laugh, to spit on Her face. He blamed Connie and his influence. “And it wasn’t you.”

A reaction. The grip around him past the point of tight. Bones creaking, heart hammering in his chest. And then slowly, gently almost, She put Her hands over his mouth. Over his nose. Another blink. Water once again, coalescing in an inhuman shape. What should have been hands melted together. The water was *freezing*, and Nando didn’t spare that much thought before he realized he couldn’t breathe.

A snake, wrapping him in coils as She submerged him and pulled him up, again and again and again. All the while She was watching, and he couldn’t read Her, faces like marble. He blinked and the image did not change. If he didn’t asphyxiate, he would drown.

Everything went white, and—

He had woken up to dark. Familiar smells, familiar ceiling. Afterimages behind his eyelids. With every blink, a new nightmare. Quiet, next to him, hair damp. For once, sleeping unaware. Ave’s eyes shining from the darkness, questioning.

Now, after yet more revelations, Nando wondered if he had had a feeling things would not go well. It wasn’t usual that he woke up angry.

With every word Quiet had spoken, Nando's heart got louder until it was so loud in his ears that it threatened to deafen him. What they knew. The dream. The way that goddess talked about Quiet reeked of ownership, possession nearly tangible. Despite the act, there was a dark, proprietary look in Her eyes.

You are never going to find him, Nando thought, carefully checking to see that the rage he was feeling wasn't showing on his face. After what they had learned, it was near impossible for it to not show. He could feel it burning in his eyes. ***I won't let you.***

Felipe had not yet regretted his choice of staying behind to guard his love, but the sight that was Borja's face almost made him reconsider. Almost.

He had always felt a certain kinship with the taller man, one of the only ones who appreciated, or at least listened to, his poetries about his love. Who tended to agree when he talked about Cain and his opinions. Who actually appreciated his cooking.

All that to say, when he saw the split lip and blooming black eye, the first emotion he recognized was *rage*.

Borja wouldn't have fought back, it wasn't in his nature. And the list of people who would assault him like that was low. Low enough to be nonexistent, or so Felipe had thought. Clearly, they had shared a dwelling with some dishonorable people.

Which led him to the current situation of him trying to patch him up. It wasn't something Felipe was used to doing, his movements clumsy to even himself. Dashing heroes didn't usually patch themselves or others up, but that didn't mean he couldn't learn. He led his compatriot to the kitchen—not what he imagined he'd first be doing here, nor with who—and ran warm water from the sink, soaking a rag. He turned, pushing Borja's outstretched and open palms aside to dab the rag on his friend's face, as gently as he could allow while washing away the blood leaking from his lip. It was a deep cut, swelling by the second. Borja froze at the touch, then relaxed as Felipe went on. He hoped that meant he was doing something that worked.

Once Borja looked presentable, as a man of his stature should, Felipe turned to fret over the refrigerator in search of something to hold over that dastardly black eye.

As he searched, he tried to find words for conversation. Something boisterous and proud, to raise his compatriot's spirits. Instead, unlike himself, he could come up with only questions. Burning in his chest. Just embers, at first, but as he turned back with a pack of frozen vegetables, it grew to a roaring flame.

“Who?” He said at last, his voice crackling in the strain and heat from his heart.

Borja took a long moment to respond. Long enough that Felipe handed off the pack of vegetables and dug into his pockets for some lip balm.

He had half the mind to apply it himself, frazzled as he was by Borja's state, though the taller man luckily had the sense to grab the balm from Felipe's hands only centimeters away from

his face. He saw him wince as he applied it, rubbing his lips together with squinted eyes. Felipe blinked. He supposed the sweet taste wasn't for everyone.

He fretted about whether or not Dami had the same displeased reaction when Borja finally spoke up, frowning—and suddenly, Felipe's attention was only on him. Answers, finally; that way he knew how to act. He wasn't made to sit still and quiet. In his opinion, he should be always acting, be it rescuing people or making his love happy or defending from threats.

Borja's tone was apologetic, "I know Gonzalo's your brother," he started, and Felipe blinked, since when? "But his temper leaves a lot to be desired."

"What?" Felipe blurted out. Opened his mouth to ask something else. Words didn't come for a moment. "But he only fights if— if people ask for it."

"I didn't ask," Borja said sharply, before his cadence softened. "But you're not wrong. He wouldn't have done it before."

"This doesn't make sense— he wouldn't just attack you for no reason. His temper— his escalated passions, you say, my friend, they were misdirected. He must have misunderstood you."

"It's not his fault," Borja turned his palms up to him, placating in a way he shouldn't be. He was the one who was attacked! "He isn't someone who can spot falsehoods easily. Most of them aren't."

Felipe latched onto that last thing. Had someone deceived all of them? Enough so they would turn their back on one of their own? "Most of them?"

"Everyone knows the Decider's word is law."

It almost took the wind out of Felipe's sails. Even after all they had seen... "No, surely not. He has been... agitated, recently, yes, but..."

"You have seen it, then," Borja said, leaning back. "You saw how afraid he was, when he realized you were seeing Dami? When you defied his unspoken word?"

It was a hard thing to forget. Felipe tried, of course. It was the right thing to do, to be the bigger man and forgive and forget his friend's misplaced comments in a moment of weakness. But it was hard.

"But it wasn't just because of that, Feli," Borja said hastily. He moved as if to grab Felipe's hands in his, forgetting the cold compress he needed to keep on his eye, leaning forward and taking it off a moment.

"Ah," Feli fretted, taking his friend's hand and delicately pushing it back to his eye. "Don't forget your state." He winced, and Felipe wilted. He was not doing enough.

A heartbeat. Felipe would give him as many as he needed, if he must collect himself. Then Borja continued. "We all have our Princesses. But him... his is missing."

“Of course,” Felipe nodded, understanding coming to him at once. A broken heart—a heart that needs mended, a heart that needs care and attention, but is pushing it away. Pity, a gentle sorrow, washed over him at the thought—it sounded terribly lonely. “It is a betrayed passion for us, then, yes? Allowing jealousy to drive wedges between himself and us, for he led each of us to our beloved, but has none to claim for his own?”

“Not quite, but close,” Borja said in a hushed whisper. Leaned in like he was telling a secret. “There is passion betrayed... but it is he who betrayed his love.”

“No,” Felipe gasped.

“Of course. And he wanted the rest of us to forget ours, in turn, and become like him. Bitter and lonely, wallowing in his pains with no attention paid to his blessings.”

“He wouldn't do that... We both came from him.”

Then again, they weren't the only ones who did, and there was a ghost in their midst...

“You should have seen the commotion last night. He is picking his favorites, and tossing out the rest.” Borja huffed, then. Felipe hesitated to call it a laugh. It was devoid of humor. “Like trash in the rain. He never did value me at all.”

Felipe opened his mouth to counter, but Borja was on a roll now. He wouldn't stop. “And he did not value Her. His love. You don't understand—the Thing we've seen in the dark, on the screen, She loved him. She loved him so terribly She promised him Everything, because She was Everything, and he could have been Everything too if only he'd accepted Her.”

Borja was not a man of many words, Felipe had thought, before. But the way he ranted now was unlike anything the man had ever heard before. The truth unfolded before Felipe. Borja was not quiet. Borja was a poet, he just needed a chance to express himself. And the words he breathed like air Felipe could scarcely understand in mind, but felt call to him in spirit. His heart pounded.

The tale Borja spun rolled over Felipe. Of a first impression, confused yet familiar and longing, and a promise made between the pairing. Promises turned into gifts, and gifts into conversations. A long and arduous process, but one made all the sweeter by the reunions in-between, Her growing stronger by the meeting and him replenished by the respite She offered him.

A question on the tip of Felipe's tongue, in the beginning, washed away in the romance of the tale. It was beautiful. In the end, that was all that ever mattered. “She was patient, Felipe,” Borja told him. “He tried to make it sound otherwise, but She was. She would have waited eternity to be with him, She gave him all the time in the world. Always at his side, never alone, only requesting him to do and be the same as Her. Requesting, in return, simple love.”

“He refused,” Borja said, and Felipe's heart stuttered. “He blamed Her for everything they went through, together, as one. Acted as if his partner were his captor, his suffering Her design. She was brilliant radiance, and he quiet shadow, and he blamed Her for his own nature. For sacrifices he made of his own will.”

“But it was a gift,” Felipe argued to no one. “He could not expect them back, or anything in return. A gift is given for the love of who you gift to. Sacrifices in the name of love are the greatest sacrifices of all.”

Borja nodded, slow and deliberate. Closed his eyes and slouched down again, sighing. He sounded tired. “I said as much.”

It took Felipe a moment to gauge the implication. “And for that, he...?”

“He played the victim.” Borja shook his head, staring at the ceiling as if it would give him answers. “The others believed him because they were inclined to. They didn’t give me a chance to state my case. You... Well, you’ve seen what Gonzalo did. Ciro, I could tell, would have done the same if his voice alone did not cut it.”

Felipe could not believe the whole house was caught in this web of lies. Surely Borja had someone in his corner. He could imagine at least one friendly face. “Fernando. I cannot imagine he would have stood for it.”

“He did not,” Borja agreed, and Felipe breathed a sigh of relief. Too early. “He was kneeling at the Decider’s feet, instead.”

Felipe tried to picture that. It was hard.

“I tried to make the Decider see...” Borja started, not meeting his eyes, “tried to make him understand it was the only thing he could do to make everything okay again, that his place was with Her, but he wouldn’t believe me. I’m starting to think he couldn’t.”

“He’s— it can’t have been on purpose...” Felipe himself didn’t know who he was defending. The Decider? His fellow Voice?

Borja scoffed, almost derisive. “You have seen how Fernando looks at him. He would excuse everything under the sun for him.”

Felipe raised his eyebrows, “Nando was the first guide, the shield to his... blade,” he tripped over his words at the not very apt comparison. All he had learned was throwing him off, he had to try to look for an explanation. “Of course he would be indulgent.”

Borja looked at him like he was waiting for something. Like he was getting to something obvious. “That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

Borja leaned back and had a long, long sigh. Felipe worried he’d tired him out with these questions.

“Are you jesting?”

Felipe frowned, slightly insulted. He did not *jest*, not about important things, and least of all about matters of love. Who did he think he was, Connie? He was capable of taking things seriously.

Borja took the sign in Felipe's lack of an answer. "Yes, Fernando was Quiet's first guide. As far as Quiet is concerned, his most important and favored guide of all. We know what he thinks of us, what he thought of the rest. Of the names he granted us, none could stand up to the likes of 'Hero,' wouldn't you say, 'Smitten'?"

Felipe shook his head. He was not the type to rank, not friends.

The name he got was what he was, 'he who feels with all he has', or perhaps 'lightning strike'. As descriptive of himself as it could be. Borja had not been granted that privilege, if he recalled it correctly. He had not been named by the Decider.

Smitten. He who loves without restraint or care. Quiet had called him crazy for acting on his nature. But what did their names have to do with all that? He gestured at Borja to go on.

"Quiet favored his guide more than his goddess. His second-in-command above his betrothed. His Hero above his Princess." Borja slumped under Felipe's unblinking stare. "Back then, the Decider listened to Hero moreso than anyone or anything else, against all reason or care, did he not?"

Yes, Felipe did remember what led to his hatching. But he remembered Nando's hesitance, too, unreasonable in the face of the perfection of his Dami. In hindsight, it was a relief. Felipe wasn't sure if he could stand to share. But back then, it was baffling, and the Decider knew it too. "He saw the error of his ways."

Borja nodded. "I managed to convince him of the right path, as well. But with... our current circumstances, he has been led astray once more. Coddled by Nando, and leaning into the hold. That is what Quiet wants, and what he hungered for and was denied with his goddess, and so rejected Her in favor of him. That selfish and needy support."

"Why would he reject love in favor of something so empty?"

"It is a different kind of love." Borja shook his head slowly, disapproving, and Felipe closed his eyes in recognition.

Now he could understand why Quiet looked at Fernando like he was his north star, visible even in his darkest moments, in the way he would follow him forever in open disregard of all the galaxy's light. Why he looked at the Princesses, at the best of times, like faded flowers, in the way time made their beauty unrecognizable to his eyes.

Why Fernando did the same, however, was something he couldn't wrap his head around. Watching Quiet like his own personal jasmine crop, blooming brighter and stronger far past his expiration date, in the way he lit up at each new sign of life and nurtured his growth with each passing day.

Quiet was... *young*. There was something in Felipe, in Gonzalo, even in Skeptic, that Quiet just... lacked. That gravitational pull towards an unknown, electric destiny, the desire that made even the harshest pains pale in the light of its presence. An instinct he hadn't yet grown into. He was unlikely to understand it until he matured. At the end of the day, that was the heart of the issue: the immaturity.

It wasn't even that much of a stretch to call him the collective soft spot of the flock. It made sense, for the others to be... indulgent, with him. In their own ways. Those indulgences would sustain him until the greater need made itself known, and Quiet could be as he was supposed to be, with who he was supposed to be with. But it seemed they'd gone too far; not just confusing their Decider in the needs he must feel and indulge, but confusing themselves in the process, right and wrong touches and words twisting into each other and mixing meaning with purpose with need.

Perhaps this was but a consequence of the number of members of the flock and the Princesses being uneven. Fernando never did have a princess of his own, did he? A pair of lonely souls was still a pairing. Some sacrifices need to be made in the name of love.

Felipe tried to imagine his compatriots— his acquaintances ganging up on Borja. Tried to imagine anything that would come out of his soft, meek, tempered voice that could inspire such an all-consuming rage towards him, that could ever justify such barbarism against his friend. He looked at Borja now, his hunched posture and swelling eye and red lip. He couldn't imagine it.

All he could think of was a group coddling around Quiet for wounds that had long-since healed, as Borja was cast out, bleeding, in the rain, for finally gathering the courage to voice his thoughts to the group. For trying to remind them of how things should be.

Everyone had a little selfishness within them. Felipe included.

He knew that when he first laid his eyes on Damiana, and his heart sung, *this one, I shall have this one and nobody else.*

He knew that when he found himself willing to sacrifice *anybody* —even the world and its entire population—if it meant Damiana's continued survival and happiness.

He knew that because he was hatched from a selfish person. If what Borja said was true — and between the busted lip and bruised eye, what reason could he have to lie? — the person Felipe was grown from had lived a tale of happiness and pain with his other half, only for him to reach out with greedy, wicked hands and *tear heaven asunder.*

Torn apart his own happy ending over dissatisfaction with his choices.

Because it all just wasn't good enough for him.

Felipe was not aware of how his eyes glowed, as bright and furious as a forest fire. His very presence seeped into the corners of the room, gathering shadows to his limbs as he **rose**. “

How dare he!

On the face of things, Felipe was a soft, gentle, chipper man. The type to, if he had to have some special quality, have an affinity to heal. To mend the broken. To patch the torn. He played the part of that type of man, because it was the type of man he needed to be. It was the type of man that the type of woman Dami was needed to be with. A Damsel to heal, and a Dashing Hero to heal her. He practiced that part with Borja, often and always, because in some ways Borja could remind Felipe of her. He greeted him in the house's halls and found

him in its dark corners, hidden away from the world, and spoke to him about shallow and inconsequential asides. Distracted him from his woes. And now, played his part though he did not have the knowledge, and tried to heal.

But Felipe, deep down, was not the man with an affinity to heal. He was a man of passion. Greater than that, a man of desire. And right now he was filled up to the brim with it. Felipe was angry—beyond anger—beyond reason. He was the darkness of the walls in a lit room. He was the shadow in the corner of one's vision. He was the empty space beneath the bed and in the corner. And in each of these secret places, he was angry.

Something in him unraveled, and he *became*.

Connie wasn't used to being afraid. Not in the way Oli was, so much that it bled into the moments when Quiet calmed down the slightest bit and the first words out of Oli's mouth was to tell him to go wash his face.

The role of leader was ill-fitting on him, but he had spoken before Nando could. Gonchi had left, maybe to let his rage loose, maybe to tell that girl about what happened. Grace emerged from the spot behind the wall she had undoubtedly been spying from, in the direction Quiet had disappeared to. Cain had started to rise, then aborted the movement. Harri had sat there, something dangerously close to regret shining in his eyes.

Connie was angry, angrier than he ever was before, and he didn't trust himself. So, mechanically, he followed the group. Watched as each of them had coffee, or tea, or cocoa, or mate, took note of Quiet's half eaten sandwich.

And then Nando started talking. About a dream he had that night. And Connie wasn't Harri, but even he could think the timing was too coincidental. What was he supposed to do? What were all of them supposed to do? The whole situation was a whirlwind that sucked them in whether they wanted to be there or not.

More than half of Connie's existence was spent in whirlwinds. He didn't like, though he was used to, things that didn't make sense.

Like Before. After what had been Plethora once, after the mirror, he had woken up somewhere far away. And he had been alone. And he had been in the water. The world had warped and he with it. There was no way to take a third option against a tsunami, only swim against the current or with it, except there was no current, nobody to make unhappy except himself and the water wanted him to drown, so he tried to persevere, tried to not show fear. He was a pebble in its path that it wanted to sand off. He couldn't breathe, he was crushed he was stretched thin he wanted to be *out of there* he never liked pain *let him out* his lungs kept filling and he couldn't cough it up and he was so very tired and he was—lost—slipped through the cracks—falling—falling—*falling*—

Air. He had no physical form, but he could feel whatever that was— that white, blinding liquid—pouring itself out of his throat as he hacked his lungs out.

A cobblestone floor. A wooden floor. A cracked floor. He was at the cabin again. As mismatched as always.

Outside, hands slammed against the windows. Waves tried to break the glass.

Whatever could pass for a body, a soul, whatever Connie was, felt tattered and worn, hazardously holding on like it was not meant to be. A realization: he had been lucky.

He huddled against a wall, and *breathed*.

Until the cabin door opened.

Something had been ~~strange wrong~~ *different* about Connie's decider.

He had felt... shattered. Weathered and worn. Looking at the cabin with disbelieving eyes for one moment. Collapsing the next, sobbing. Connie's companion had chosen to let his nausea at the confusing geometry of the place evaporate the moment the decider's knees buckled.

He was as waterlogged as Connie, the moment he slammed into this room. Connie had some theories about what happened. None of them were good. None of them had even come close.

A feeling had emanated from him, a heaviness that neither of the Voices could reach, as if it was being hidden by a barrier. A wall that they just couldn't climb over. But beyond it, they could sense something. Something heavy and hollow and afraid, and sad too. Too much sadness to measure.

He could have let Hero do all the mushy work, Connie wasn't a good part of them after all. But he had thought of the decider's soul, fraying at the edges and barely managing to shape something resembling a body, like it had forgotten how. He thought of the utter terror on his face when they stepped into the cabin. He thought of his kindness, and his fear—how at odds the two emotions were with each other.

The decider had needed him.

And so, he had lied. *'I've been here since you left me here.'*

He had felt the weight of Hero's eyes on him. But there was no way he would let the decider worry even more, not when he rejected the script entirely and wouldn't even go down the basement, blade or no blade. The decider had needed him, and that was that.

After... *After*, the thought still reverberated in Connie's head, along with the knowledge that in a dead timeline he *did* drown. And Quiet had been hurt. And Quiet had needed him then.

"We barely made it out," Nando said, plunging him back to the present—and then his breath hitched. He went silent for just a moment. "I didn't think either of us *would*."

And even so, even after all that happened, they still chose to take Connie with them. Gave him another chance. "We did."

A long pause. Connie fidgeted in the silence. Then, Nando lifted his head and looked him dead in the eyes. Connie tensed and went still. “Could we do it again?”

There was something terribly flat in Nando’s tone. Not tired, not resigned, not even empty. A steady, stabilized pulse, a humming energy so consistent it would be mistaken for no energy at all. In that tone was neither the security of a hardened promise nor the direction of an intentional threat, but the textured nothing of a place far away. An answer trapped in the form of a question.

Connie swallowed. Commitment was scary. Took a long breath out, and said, “we don’t have to.”

The energy in the room cut. Nando blinked. “You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

Connie tried to make himself forget the words Borja had spat at them. Who said Quiet wasn't a God? On the other hand, maybe it was a good thing. Connie had yet to meet a sane God. He reached his hand to touch one of the walls, tapped it twice, "this is my heaven."

Nando opened his mouth. Closed it, unsure. “I’m sure Quiet would be flattered to hear that —”

“No me estas entendiendo.” Connie shook his head. Took a breath. He wasn’t one to get serious, it was almost anathema to him. “This is my heaven, and I believe in no gods.”

Connie could be the first to tell people that one of his many flaws was his inability to know when to shut up. He had never expected it to be literal, words pouring out like a faucet with years of backup. “I believe in Gonchi. I believe in hands that could just as easily shatter my skull as they could mend my spine, and which pick and choose which capacity to embrace through split-second choices and bloodstained songs.

“I believe in Ave. I believe in a man missing a quarter of his back and yet had legs that could sprint faster than us all anyway. I believe in something other than a man. I believe in an instinct only he has, beyond us both, that knows how to dodge and in what directions. I believe in claws that rend and teeth that bite.

“I believe in Paco. I believe in attentive eyes, the ones that caught how to keep us alive before we knew how to live, and the ones learning to live now in recipes and pots and pans.

“I believe in you. No, don’t give me that look, I do. I believe in a force that could keep us all moving and a certainty that keeps us all standing. I believe in a spine that withstood the full blunt force of a tsunami and strained to push through it. I believe in whatever it was we could call ourselves before, the presence you inhabited and the sound of your voice in our shared head. I believe in the whole of you at the end of Before who chose to stick by us.

“I believe in Quiet. I believe in decisions, and life, and things I have not seen. I believe in wings that withstood eternity, that spread and fly after their flight feathers were ripped out,

that fold over and swaddle each of us in down feathers that couldn't be plucked. I believe in the threads that connect each of us together.

"I believe in hands that build and guard our gates; in instinct that protects from things we cannot name; in eyes that learn when to stare and when to sleep; in unbreakable spines that never fold; in an unspoken understanding and a network of quiet things. There are no gods, but we live as a pantheon in this heaven.

No false deity is allowed inside."

Connie took a breath. His lungs were spent, his throat parched, but he felt lighter than he had in all his life. The room came back into focus.

Nando blinked, bemusement and fondness warring in his eyes. "I thought you didn't believe in anything."

Connie finally smiled. "Shh, don't tell."

The room had come back into focus, which meant he remembered there were people around him, which meant most of the house's inhabitants were there, which meant he was watching his reputation go up in flames.

Gonchi was *sniffing*, for the love of everything!

And Oli was staring at him with the sort of grin Connie had grown used to seeing in his own face, not his. Connie didn't think that lightly, but. *Bitch*.

Bitch, nothing. Bitching was the one thing Ciro was equipped to do, and by the gods he was going to do it. It's not like he had much else to do last night. Other than wiping blood away from floorboards.

It had been one of the worst nights in Ciro's existence. What a confirmation, that all the bullshit he and they ever endured could be wrapped up in one little cosmic game at their expense. What a way to spend an evening, having to be around *her* again, with the blades and her nonchalant cruelty. And after, being stuck between trying to wrap his head around Cain literally admitting he kept everyone alive just 'cause they were "interesting" to him, the fucking prick, and that not-Cain's hatred of the rest of them for no discernible reason beyond that he was an asshole— and he— and—

"And Harri brought Cain into our room— our *shared* room, mind you!— to clean and dress the wounds Ave gave him— deserved! Fucking *deserved!* — and I heard him talking, I could hear that goddamn tone and it was fucking placating and what the fuck was he thinking, what the fuck was he going on about with Paco— saying Paco didn't help— saying Ave didn't help...!? And he was defending *Cain*?! The same one who wanted to wipe Quiet's memories?!"

To think that Ciro *ever* thought Cain was good, while fighting that woman. To think that, at one point, he appreciated the blurring of the lines between life and death, appreciated that he

only needed to count the number of times the damned dust-eating motherfucking Narrator *said* she skewered them rather than the times they all felt their heart stop beating. Not any-fucking-more! Not when he was not stopping there, when he wanted to wipe memories and feelings and very *selves* away.

Ave had the right idea.

“And on top of that, Harri didn’t even give Quiet space before forcing him to talk about that diosa malparida!”

“I don’t think She was birthed from anything—“

“ME VALE VERGA! The *unfairness* of it all, Quiet didn’t ask for this. None of us fucking asked for this! We went through so much hell, just to be told in the end that *that was the fucking warmup round?!* ” his vocal chords ached from the effort, but it was a good kind of burn, it let out the embers in his chest. “We died, we left him *alone* , he had to escape by himself and we couldn’t DO anything!”

Everyone had seen Ciro angry before, but none yet had the chance to look into his eyes as he was. Now all of them were beholden to that unique and delightful privilege: to see the same blue-gray coloration, and yet no similarities to note at all.

Angry as he was, they were the blue-greens-gray of a trapped hurricane, no longer contained within his iris but encompassing the entirety of his eyes, flickers of lightning and shipwrecks and debris glittering across them, ever-moving. His pupils were the only still part of his gaze, instead of black, a small circle of sky blue, the Eye of his Eye, one could say.

Ciro, having apparently said his piece, heaved breaths in the open space of the room. Oli was grateful for the calm after the storm. Maybe tensions could de-escalate around here, for a change?

“Harri helped him?” Connie frowned. “After all that?”

“Someone had to.” Harri chose that moment to announce his presence. Well—more accurately, he’d announced his presence a couple minutes earlier with his corrections on Transformation’s origins, but it was that moment that he truly asserted his place in the room. If Oli would make a teensy eensy critique, well, he could really use some lessons on proper timing. Or a proper point to interject on.

A fire ignited beneath Ciro again, enough for him to rise to his full height and stare Harri down. Oli flinched; he wasn’t sure how to deal with this. His head swiveled over to Harri just as the two rivals made eye contact— and Oli blinked, shocked at the expression on his face. His eyes were filled with remorse. It looked like his eyes had grown so big— so big that they were the only thing he could focus on. There was so much hurt in his eyes that he couldn’t have cried if he’d wanted to. He stood there looking at Ciro for a moment that was endless.

What else was there to say?

Oli remembered asking, a few days into his life as an actual *individual*, ‘*what is the cost, what are you getting from this, what am I sacrificing,*’ and not believing Quiet when he replied ‘*nothing, nothing at all.*’

Having spent less than half an hour just trying to keep the men in the room from assaulting each other *again*... he had to wonder why Quiet, apparently, *wanted* this cacophony back in his head. These guys were *outside* his and he was still getting a headache. He should’ve thought twice about this whole “mediator” thing. He did not like it one bit. They were beyond loud when they wanted to be.

And he had no clue how to stop the maelstrom of noise that would surely follow— he had told Harri to go somewhere else, do something else, but had he listened? Noooo.

Connie stood up as if electrified. “Anyone want to take bets on which one of the mini-Transformations gets kicked out of their house first?”

A small part of Oli couldn’t help but go *ha, like I’ll forget that speech anytime soon. That’s what you get for making fun of me.* Unfortunately, another part of him appreciated the topic change. He settled for a smug look instead. Nothing quite like a smug look to clue someone in on how utterly aware of *their* shortcomings you are.

(And if he’d been waiting to hear his own name in Connie’s voice and been left with empty air instead, well, he made *extra* sure not to think about *that*.)

Taking the bait for what it was, or perhaps mistaking it for an olive branch, Harri perked up. “I’ll get the whiteboard out.”

“Guys... we shouldn’t bet on that.” Nando’s sigh could have been heard twenty blocks over.

Harri perked up even more when he looked at Nando and Nando didn’t look away. “Don’t think of it as betting. Think of it as strategic speculation. So we know what we’re up against once it happens.”

Oli felt his lips twitch up. He could spot attempts at mirroring when he saw them in action, but he wasn’t about to let him win, all the same. He was still one of the two personas non gratas of the house. He still wasn’t looking at Harri. “That’s devious as hell (and I love you for it, didn’t know that side of you) but it’s absolutely still betting because money is changing hands.”

Harri went to the hallway, third door to the left. His room. A few long moments later, he was carrying a whiteboard almost bigger than himself, markers on their way to slipping from his fingers. With a grin, he placed it leaning on one side of the table.

In the center of it, in bold red letters, there was the phrase ‘HOW TO KILL GOD’.

Before Oli could even begin to process that, there was a knock on the door.

Nando looked up after a slight delay. He looked a decade older than he was a day or so ago, eyes tired and posture heavy. Oli hopped up. “Wwwelll, I’ll let you boys get right on to it,

I've got some greetings to manage!" And so he sprinted away.

He opened the door. He was expecting two men. Wrong again: three women were behind it.

Damiana, hair and dress and jacket soaked through, hair almost flat from the rain, shivering. Scared and unsure.

Tabitha, her braid dripping water, hand still poised to knock once more, a frantic look in her eyes. Desperate yet focused.

Winnie had blue shadows under her eyes, dirty fingernails, and wild hair. (He could swear there were plants stuck in it.) She flinched back at the sight of *him*, hunching over in the rain. Distainful but defenseless.

They looked *fractured*. Angry and frustrated and hungry all at the same time. *Intruders*, was his first thought. Then, foreign to him: *unsafe*, in relation to *them*. *Danger*, in relation to *where they came from*. He *could* close the door, right now... Or...

Dami opened her mouth. Hesitated. "May we come in?"

Chapter End Notes

Again just in case you missed it, there's a discord for this fic!
<https://discord.gg/EqNQvpgJDT>

Dua: There's a subspecies of author that always travels in pairs or packs. It is known that writing invitations are, to that subspecies, elaborate declarations of friendship. That method is how I convinced Thinky to help me with Petrified! They're amazing and so knowledgeable of STP, you'll see what I mean.

overthink_it: 'thank you, thank you! i'm just happy to be here.' ahem. must be said, first and foremost: dua's work is an absolute delight, and it's all the more delightful i've been invited onboard this ship to get it sailing. i suppose we'll see where the tides take us. not those tides, i hope, but one can never know.

many many many thanks to Izabelle_GD, btw, with those Shifty descriptions. amazing work on her end, couldn't have stitched that scene together without her.

Chapter 14: Fiesta en lo del Doctor Hermes

Chapter Summary

Talks are had, a massage is done. Among all that the rain keeps pouring.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Borja was a witness, once more, of something unnatural. Of Felipe blending with the shadows of the room until he was one, rising in size until he brushed the ceiling. His eyes strayed from his glowing eyes to his hands – those claws were meant to hurt. Borja hoped he didn't choose his target in him—then he stopped hoping altogether.

There was no space for hope here. There was a being of darkness in the room, and he was so blindingly angry, trembling with it to the point his edges unraveled into something shaky and undefined. Borja felt like he was burning alive, past the point of sweating. The anger crushed him. It pushed in on all sides, eagerly coming down on him like a collapsing building—he couldn't breathe, mouth opening in a gasp—

He fell to his knees. The light dimmed — ‘shadow’ wasn't a proper name for whatever Felipe had turned into, not with the way it seemed to actively suck up the light's ray, nor the way it spread on the walls like a creeping mold. It simultaneously stole away the light that was and choked out what light would remain. It was more solid, with mass.

Not even quiet, either. The air hummed, a high pitched sound, like lightning about to strike. Ringing in his ears.

What was going on?

He felt a pair of hands on his shoulders, cold and clammy, patting him down. He felt another pair of hands, warm and resolute, hoisting him up. Another pair of hands, nondescript and unfamiliar, briskly scooting him aside.

“Damiana will come back soon,” five voices rang out at once, as one, as soon as their combined origin turned from Borja towards the shadows on the wall. Their multifaceted tones all came together into one voice. Steadfast, calm, and soothing. One of Plethora's hands raised as if to grasp his. “You don't need to worry. Time spent away from her is still time spent in reference to her.”

Something flickered in the air. The darkness expanded, the scene skipping like a broken record as the shadows on the walls bent down to crowd the quintuplet. From where he stood in the dark, Borja could not make out their faces, just their multifaceted form; a light in the dark. A hand reached out as a hand drew back as a hand curled into a fist as all of them

reacted, but none of them chose, allowing a pause in the rhythm of the shadow's dance so it might collect itself enough to—

*“She left? She abandoned me for him? Abandoning love for him? No, that’s not right. That’s not it at all. She left because he lied to her, because he lied to all of us, he lied to me. **We do not have to live in lies any longer.**”*

—speak, in a tone Borja had never heard before this very moment. Frantic and fast paced like the words burst out of him, then abruptly calm and collected.

Somehow, the latter scared him more.

Plethora stared him down, their arms casually hanging at their sides and defensively raised to push him out of their personal space and reaching to pat him comfortingly. They spoke, their voices messy, “are you sure of what you want to do? We can—” they cleared their throat, voices syncing back up again, “we can help you find your way down the paths you have to walk.”

A whisper in unseen places as the house creaked in place of the darkness's joints. Felipe leaned down to them, murmuring. “There is only one thing to do.”

“There are many,” they replied, cocking their heads to the side playfully. There was, somehow, a wink in their tone in absence of a light to show it on their faces. “That is the nature of choice, we’re learning. There are many things to do, but only one choice that can be made in a single lifetime. In the end, it’s all we can do to trust the choices we’re making are the right choices.”

“There’s no two options, just one.”

Massive talons were caught in smaller hands, two pairs each as the third joined each other politely at Plethora's middle. They spoke as one, monotone and flat, “Yours is a desire borne of the narrow view of a single life,” and again as many, curious and inquisitive, “and what motivates you, what drive pushes you down that path you feel you must walk?”

Borja wasn't sure asking that was a good idea. Who knew what could set him off? He nearly moved, if just to rise, if just to warn her of the dangers of her assertions at a time like this, but he couldn't even see his own hand raised in front of his face. He couldn't speak over them. The darkness would surely choke out the noise.

Somehow, the shadows slumped further down. Then—something like a smile, silver on black, winked from the darkness.

“Her.”

Plethora nodded—then shook their head—then nodded again. “Her. You *are* hers. And she—yours.” A pause. Uncertainty filled the air as the shadows *shook*. In rage? In agreement? In flattery? Felipe's expression, if such a thing could even be identified, was unreadable. Unknowable. “That union, the one you cherish so dearly... is that it? Is that what—” a break

in the script, three different conclusions, “—you’re after? —you’re protecting? —you want?”

A longer pause. Plethora leaned, backwards then forwards, fighting with themselves. They opened their mouths again, a discordant song playing as each member of the chorus found their own lyrics to sing. It was indecipherable among the black—the only visible point being the movement of their body. Their arms flailed, shaking and grasping blindly in their confusion, in their frustration. Then they went silent. Still.

A long silence. A short pause. The distant sound of breathing.

Borja watched as suddenly Plethora went limp, limbs dangling where they fell and head nodding forward. He startled, nearly making an approach back towards the center of the room, the center of attention, when the conjoined quintuplet began twitching. Something in their expressions changed, shifting, and when they next spoke, only a single voice rose from their chorus. Soft, gentle, and just a little meek.

If Borja didn’t know any better, he’d say it reminded him of Dami.

“It must be lonely, out there, don’t you think? Without *Hers* to guide Her, all alone in the dark. Not knowing when he’ll be back, if he’ll come for Her at all.”

The darkness *flinched* as though struck, light escaping its grasp for just a moment and flooding the room. Borja could see, again, just a moment. And just a moment was long enough to see several pairs of closed eyes, serene smiles, and one—one bright-eyed face staring Felipe down as his claws shook in her grasp.

“But it’s all going to be okay! We know that, all of us, because of the feeling we all share. You included.” Plethora nodded, her hands stroking Felipe’s, massaging unseen tensions in unseen fibers in unseen muscles. Arms lowered into the touch. “We all know it,” she continued warmly as he faltered and crumbled into her hold, “that warmth in our chest, that gentle glow that makes all the bad go away—that makes the bad *not so bad, not with them*. And it never got weaker in his absence, only stronger, and stronger, and stronger with each return, each cherished moment of reunion. You’ve felt it too, you remember what it was like to be taken by the moment.”

There was something fond in Plethora’s tone, a laugh on the current personality’s lips as she spoke on her own. Borja wondered, the thought unheeded, what she was laughing about. If the laughter was even real. It didn’t feel real. Nothing so happy could ever be real.

Not that he would ever, ever, say that aloud. He didn’t want Plethora to stop calming Felipe and the anger to come back.

“It’s how things are meant to be. And that memory, that feeling, will never, ever, ever go away. So nothing can ever be truly bad. Not as long as the both of them exist.” Plethora continued to hold Felipe, him lowering into her and her lowering into him. Dragging each other down into the depths of their dark embrace. “That’s what the game was about, right? A reminder of all they’ve been through together. Is there anything more real than that?”

If someone asked Borja, which they wouldn't, he'd tell them just that was nowhere near enough. There had to be something to pay for the transgression. Pay homage, either through worship or sacrifice.

Still, Plethora continued to hold Felipe, and still she continued whispering sweet nothings and warm promises and cold assurances towards the mass of darkness Borja once recognized as a man he knew. He blinked, squinting harshly to make out even the slightest of details from the display. Massages of his hands progressed into rubbing his arms, pulling him down until they could get at his shoulders. A neverending collage of touches, a tapestry of contact woven onto Felipe as he continued to sink deeper and deeper into them.

Borja came to the startling, if in hindsight not quite shocking, realization that this wasn't about comfort. This was the conquering of a monster. It was about wearing Felipe down. Eroding his will one touch at a time, until anger melted into bliss.

Borja knew it would work eventually, for one simple reason: he had come from Quiet.

No matter how strong he was, no matter how strong his *will* was, he would break simply because he was *meant* to.

With enough time, the shadows of the room receded, just enough for Borja to begin making out its form again, and Felipe leaned against the quintuplet, trembling. Arms that were once limp now rose, faces waking up to smile in the embrace. They shushed his continued mutterings, arguments dying as they were made, continuing to stroke his arms and grip his shoulders. It was still not enough—Borja could see it in his claws and shaking form, the edges of the shadows whipping and lashing out at the light, could see that Felipe was still angry. But he was less so. Enough to be smaller—smaller, again, than Borja, though larger than he by all accounts had a right to be, still. A very small part of him hoped that didn't come with any height changes for Felipe once the shadow was gone.

Not that he thought this was going to be a one-and-done kind of thing. Felipe didn't get angry often, but his ability to seethe was uncontested, even moreso than what Borja had thought. He'd tapped on something putrid while feeling for a weakness in his stronghold, and come away with a pressure point on a dam he never knew existed. With the right timing, that pressure could be instrumental in turning the house's tensions away from them both. He'd have to keep it in mind—and find a sweet spot, so that he wouldn't be caught in the crossfire.

He huffed a breath, overcome by the weight of his newfound responsibilities, and Plethora reacted, their turned head visible in the weak light that yet survived. He watched them watch him, their cool, empty, gentle eyes regarding, evaluating, and watching him in wary yet noncommittal concern.

A twitch, a transition, and a slight change in expression. More guarded, more distrusting, but not hostile. *Tabitha*, Borja's mind supplied, before, *No, that's not right*.

"In a way, it hasn't been much time at all, but it must feel, for Her, like it's been forever since She last saw him. And he *thinks* he's not coming back... But She's patient. She can wait as long as it takes." Their other faces blinked placidly at him.

Well, patient, Felipe was not. Borja was already picturing what light would bring. His friend wasn't the kind of person to let go of his feelings after consulting them with the pillow. If anything, time to think only made them stronger. They tended to stew a lot on their feelings, Felipe and him.

"We'll try to be quick." He offered. He knew how dangerous it would be to promise something concrete without having the means to actually do it. But he was never someone to go back on his word, even less so about something like this. As recalcitrant as Quiet was about the whole situation, Borja was sure he had been listening to him before the others reacted.

He just had to keep pushing. Keep up the touches, and Quiet's ego would be conquered yet, their soul saved from their misplaced devotions. Maintain contact at all costs, as Plethora showed him the way for. It would work. He could make him listen, yet.

If not, he had backup.

"We know you will."

Quiet had never had the best control over his emotions. He had control over some things. His thoughts, sometimes. His choices, sometimes. His body, sometimes. Control was never a certainty at any point in his life, never on the specifics, but there was always either something he could expect to be able to do or something he could expect himself incapable of. Emotions tended to be his incapability. And that's without taking into account the Voices that amplified and deadened those emotions. Which took the work of regulation away from him, leaving him even more inept in their absence.

So, overall, he shouldn't have been surprised that when he tried to explain what happened before, the memories dragged him down.

Down.

Down.

And he couldn't push himself back up. He still remembered. He couldn't bury it. Not when it had been most of his long and short existence. Through the endless loops, She had shaped him. She had destroyed him. And She had reveled in it.

He had broken free from Her. It wasn't like She could make a tear into the world and spirit him away the way She had done with the Princesses, right? *Right?* (There was a space that the Voice of the Paranoid had long since crawled out of, a space he used to occupy. The Decider was lingering in that space, now.)

Would having no heart change the way She behaved or were Her countless other vessels enough for her to maintain Her shape, without him to see?

Time spent away from Her, he knew the phrase. Even so, no matter what She told him before he took Her hand, he wondered if She would still be mad at the weeks or months that passed.

If. (He couldn't recall the condition he needed to meet for the favorable outcome. Did She tell him? He didn't want Her to be mad at him. He didn't want them both to hate each other.)

The fact he had forgotten something She told him was almost a novelty. He used to do his best to remember every word, She did so loathe repeating herself. 'Punishment' and 'retribution' and 'deserving' might not have been concepts that existed to Her. They were still very, very real to him. He deserved all of it. He deserved none of it. All of it could have been avoided had he just done the right things from the start. None of it could have been avoided, he was meant to suffer, it was meant to be. It was his fault.

It was his fault.

It was strange to consider how he had craved contact the way that happened with the Dragon, with the Wild— *he had named each and every princess, continuing to refer to them as such was a small act of rebellion back then. People, they had been people!* —and how he had shied away from it back then. From Her thoughts, Her changing.

How She had to *have* him, broken, bent, remade into the shape She desired. And how even now, every step he took in suffering—whether he resisted or embraced it—was a victory for Her. In his defiance, She would always win—and in his surrender, She'd have him without trying. He remembered how it felt, his essence, his thread bending and snapping under the weight of Her designs. She had set the path, plotted the course, and no matter how hard he fought to break free, he could never escape. Not from Her.

There was no other existence but this—no other purpose. He was Her canvas, Her puppet, Her plaything. His existence, his suffering, was Hers to command, and there would never be a release, never a finality.

Never, *never*, **never**—

Something *yanked* him up, severing that train of thought so quickly he didn't realize right away. Three of his threads burned from within, a safety net, a rope. He could think again. Needles in his eyes made the world blurry, his ears were ringing to the chime of the pain splitting his skull, his throat burned with the taste of metal... but he could think.

Ave, Ciro and Paco were apologizing, he recognized, not so much hearing their words past the ringing as he did feel their anguish burning his chest from the inside out. Something was gurgling inside him—or outside of him, sticky popping sounding out somewhere on his temple. Apologizing? To him? For getting him back to his senses? Paco was rubbing at his eyes and Ave was clutching at the sides of his head and Ciro was choking and—and they didn't look— why were they afraid?

Something wet was trickling from Quiet's ear; he wiped it with his sleeve and it came back red. The tears in his eyes burned. He coughed, hacking out the lump in his throat. Red again. Typical. Mundane. Unimportant.

More importantly: he could hear his Voices again.

Everything was good. Good as gold.

(concern) (anguish) (pain)

Not everything. He'd hurt them again, he could see the proof of it, and intent never mattered and Voices got around. Not that he wouldn't deserve it, of course -- it was hard to argue that when that dead timeline was a result of his own choices. He tried not to blink at the red-tinged memories behind his eyelids.

Paco stopped dead.

(betrayal) (distrust) (fear) (notminenotminenotminenevermine)

Hands rubbing at Paco's eyes came away red, trembling. Quiet could feel his pulse thrumming throughout his head, in his face and throat. He swallowed thickly, blinking away the blood between them. Bloodshot eyes stared back into his own in unconcealed *horror*.

Ave took a step towards him, deliberately slow. Quiet remembered being told not to flinch. Quiet remembered being told they owed it to their body to move. Ave took another step forward. Quiet remembered a compulsion to play dead. Quiet remembered a recommendation to lie down and sleep. Another step. Quiet could almost remember... words, real words, something like...

Hands on his shoulders. A gentle nudging, then arms wrapping around him. A word like "safety." A sensation of closing his eyes. A word like "rest." Carefully, carefully, reaching up to return the hug. A word... like...

Quiet remembered nothing like this.

Something weighty *slammed* into Quiet, then, Ave hissing as another pair of arms *grabbed* them and pushed them forward into a hold. Not quite a hold. Harsher than that, sharp around the edges, not delicate and gentle like Ave had been but rough and desperate.

*I'm here. I'm here, I'm **here!***

Ave was still hissing, scolding, but Quiet didn't need to hear those words. These were new words. Buzzing in his chest, building in his eyes and his throat and his ears, nonverbal but spoken all the same. Ciro's hug was tight—if he'd grabbed him higher up, nearer to his neck, it would be more of a strangle than a hug, truly. Tight enough that Quiet was starting to think he wouldn't be letting go at all. Locked in place. Grounded. Not going anywhere.

Nothing would drag him down again.

Two of these three threads were pulsing with the unique thrums of *(apology) (regret)*, and for the life of him Quiet couldn't understand why, if anything he should be apologizing to them for making them hurt themselves...

A memory of blades. A memory of burning.

Quiet opened his mouth to speak, but closed it when the red almost overflowed. No matter how many times, he could never get used to the taste of blood.

To both of them, he asked,

(curiosity) (confusion) Why are you sorry?

And, to Ciro,

(admiration) (adoration) We had a whole crew, a team of incredible people that could think up every strategy from every angle you could think of. And I saw them try every single one, and she tore through us like we were nothing but a blade of grass.

And, to Ave,

(admiration) (sympathy) We had no backup, we couldn't stop to think of a strategy, but the fact we survived for so long was only because of you. Always just a little bit longer, because of you. This was never designed to be fair.

(regret) (anger) There's always something different I could have done—

(unworthy) (defeat) I should have been faster—

*(urgency) There was **nothing** we could have done!*

Two flinches at once. Ave loosened his grip, pulled away. Like he was trying to give Quiet space, keep him from shattering. Ciro tightened his grip, pulled Quiet tighter. Like he was trying to *be* his space, keep him together.

(rejection) Bullshit, I— (desperation) I have to believe there was something we could do. Because if there wasn't, then we... (realization) (exhaustion) (regret) we had fuck all to rely on, didn't we? And you all were relying on me, and— and...

Never fair, no matter what happened, and two of his Voices had the unfortunate fate of hatching when none of his choices, none of his tricks or his smarts or his instincts mattered. But that was it, wasn't it? Wasn't that what his memories told him just a little bit ago? How it was how it was supposed to be?

Somehow, for his Voices, it always felt different. If there was someone deserving of a fighting chance, it was them.

Ave's hands found Quiet's back again, delicate and soft and uncertain. From the depths of the newly developed group hug, Quiet managed to look up high enough to see Paco still there, *still there*, just—distant. Hesitant. Blood still dripped and fell like tears from the corners of his eyes, but he gingerly approached—and, tentatively, placed a single hand on Quiet's shoulder.

Pat, pat, pat. A memory of—not working, anymore.

A withdrawn touch, hands tense and trembling and red. *Too much. Not yet.* Then—interlinked. A better touch. A good touch. *Still here.*

Something in him loosened. A tension he hadn't realized he was carrying, undone, unspooling from the knots it tied itself in. A pressure deep in his chest ebbed away as he leaned into Ave's and Ciro's arms, as Paco's hand clenched in his own, his flock's anxiety rolling through and outside of him, purifying into one singular sentiment. One distilled thought...

(Truth) I'm proud of you.

...slipping, subconsciously, through his fingers.

The effect on the immediate flock was as obvious as it was predictable. A tighter hug, a reciprocation. An acceptance of a given knowledge, with all the context necessary to understand it and the gift's purpose.

Paco felt the thought slip through his mind's filter and nestle someplace deeper, a fundamental truth of the world's construction laid out before him. For a brief, startling moment, the universe was awake and aware and saw him and knew him—and he felt at ease, in the sights of intangible eyes which so unconditionally *loved* him. He could not touch, he could not be touched, but his attempt to be there for Quiet anyway as Quiet was always there for him was noticed and appreciated and the words-that-were-more-than-words left no room for speculation: that was enough. Paco would always be enough, even more than enough. The moment passed, but the truth never would. He rubbed his thumb over Quiet's and felt the burning texture of another's skin and focused on his breathing, focused on the increased pulses of his friends. This was more than enough.

A cold mind in a cold vessel. A bright extension of soul presented in technicolor among his monochrome world. Praise for his closest, most special Voice, readily taken in as if expected and awaited, sucked away into the deepest of abyss.

Of course.

He responds. As is only customary towards a gift. There is more lingering in the wings of his contact, feeling along the thread for its remnants or its continuations, trailing along its spines for further responses. Nothing more; a compact, densely woven message. Nothing more to say. Cain stands just a little straighter. Proud.

Nando had been talking with Harri. Had been trying to think of ideas, had been trying to be useful.

Then.

Nando tried to not be selfish, to think of others before himself, but he had desires. In the cabin it had been for connection, for peace, for sympathy.

Praise had not been something he had admitted to himself, and yet. He'd always been a little weak to flattery. A little eager to please. A little... starved, for acknowledgement of his

efforts and successes and him. He hadn't yet been ready to accept this about himself, really. And still wasn't, even after (*Truth*) drilled itself into his very being and forced the air out of his lungs in one smooth movement. He didn't as much decide to open himself up to it as it were that his walls simply ceased to exist for a moment, a compressed and burning desire forced out into the open and met so readily that for half a second it were as though the desire were simply always known—and worse yet, always understood, with a promise that it would be met.

He struggled for a reply, white noise falling out of him as he stalled in place. 'Thank you'? 'You too'? 'Why?' He did not want to ask why. Then it might not happen again—he wanted it to happen again—*what?* No—he... he just was confused, and nervous, and happy—but mostly confused, he asserted.

Oleander *was* in the middle of something, but okay. Okay.

He *was* inviting two sodden friends in from the rain, welcoming them in and gaining their favors and quite charismatically pulling from them the reasons for their visits. He *was* about to try and turn the odd one out away, before her influence corrupted the other two into scheming as his back was turned. But he was also playing host, and de facto leader, and a mediator and a great many things of a great many skills he most certainly had. It was a dead certainty, of course, that his excellence would be noticed and rewarded. It hadn't yet been. Not by the others, not by Connie in his speech. (Not that Oleander was the type that others would believe in, anyway. It would've been weird! He wasn't waiting to hear what Connie had to say about him, why would anyone even think that?) But that (*Truth*) rang on more than the superficial, and it threw Oli off his rhythm.

That, and the *pitter patter* of Connie's footsteps *sprinting* away to his room. That, and the sound of something *dropping* in the living room. That, and the entirely unrelated lump that formed in his throat and made it *impossible* to continue speaking aloud.

Tabitha couldn't have predicted that being a bad influence on her sister would spiral into this.

No, that's not right. Retrace that thought: it was spiraling even before that. What was the catalyst? When Felipe had decided to stay? It felt as though things were unraveling around her for a long, long time, before even that... but it certainly accelerated when Tabi's twin could not escape her lover. Felipe never sat with Tabi right—not even when he had no name, no face, just a title Dami referred to him by and a single love story played on loop. That baseless skepticism grew to a strong foundation of discomfort when she heard the Voice of the "Smitten" on the screen, self-sacrificing streak made readily apparent and red flags waving rapidly before her eyes.

So, no, she wasn't exactly *thrilled* that her sister's boyfriend planned to stay the night.

She told him as much, even. Cornered him where he couldn't escape and couldn't escalate if her intervention went sideways. Explained how her sister was smart about many things, and dumb about others, and the careful attention she'd paid the past couple of months to determine exactly which things Dami would or wouldn't say and could or couldn't admit to.

How Dami had changed and grown—and Tabi would facilitate that growth and be beside her for what it entailed. She ordered “Felipe,” in no uncertain terms, to be *cautious* of how he deemed himself fit to approach both her sister or her. Or else he’d learn just what she’d do to make him pay, if he dared hurt a single hair on her head.

His response, a lazy blink and an easy grin and a shallow remark on what a good sister Dami’s lucky to have in Tabi, did nothing to soothe her concerns.

Nor did *anything* that happened the rest of his “temporary stay.”

Beast and Razor had returned from who-knows-where (since when did they leave the house? She didn’t even know they were friends!) with one of the boys in tow. Not that she had seen much of them, Razor went to the bathroom in an instant. Borja had not looked good, on his way to catch a cold and injured. Sirens had started to go in her head from that alone. Why come back? Why be out at all, in this weather? Could whatever it was he came for not wait until the morning? What prompted this urgency?

The talk Thelka had with Borja was grounds enough for her to want to leave, to huddle up somewhere quiet and process what she had heard. The sheer disregard for human life Thelka had, the disrespect to Borja, the way she was not as concerned or alarmed as she should have been when talking about the thing in the dark. How she referred to the thing that had killed Damiana as a ‘powerful force of nature’.

There was a clear disconnect in the way Thelka saw the world compared to her, and a soul-deep discomfort had seized her. Time, she had just needed *time*, and the thought disappeared but it kept springing to life like the world’s most determined fly.

She sprinted down the hallway to her room—

Vertigo, like falling upwards, drifting into someplace unseen.

—why was she here? What did she come here for?

She grabbed her clothes from the closet, absentminded and dazed, and recalled (*time, need time*), and started pulling everything—

A stumble in footwork, a lost move in a dance too complex to recall in its entirety.

—what was she doing? She was... reorganizing. She put her things together and put them back.

She stared at the open closet. Remembered (*need more time*). Forgot. Remembered (*losing time*). Forgot. Remembered (*missing time!*). Forgot. A little progress made each *time*. A little foggier recollection each *time*. A greater, greater, greater sense of *foreboding*— and the rhythm broke.

It’s time. Tabi felt her heart in her throat. How long has she been in her room? She had to act. *Quickly!*

Between lighting strikes that obscured the sound of her movements, she had started to pack her things. Had made Dami do that too, and when she refused, saying it would be beyond rude to leave her boyfriend alone when she was the one who didn't say 'no' to him staying, Tabi packed Dami's bag for her.

Tabi was not granted the time she wished for, not before Winnie had barged into her room, bag already packed, hair wild, leaves wild, eyes wilder. What she had heard: Borja and Felipe talking, Borja weaving tall tales, the nasty plotting of a nastier trick. Winnie recounted, with no small traces of stress in her tone, how Felipe sounded more agitated as it went on. "Something strange is happening between them, and it won't be long before Loverboy has all hell break loose!"

A prophetic statement, as it turned out. Mere moments later, the lights in the house—they couldn't have *gone out*, there was no power surge, and yet—there was no light left in the room. A great darkness swept over the group as Tabi's stomach *dropped*.

At least Damiana came with without any further hassle.

Yes, they were cold, soaked, and would probably get sick if her freezing feet were any indication, but at least they were safe. It was like a smothering blanket over her thoughts had fallen off and she had only started to notice the shortness of her breathing.

Forget not knowing Razor and Beast were friends—what was she thinking, so placidly existing in the same space as Beast at all? An obligate carnivore no one was buying groceries for, who was only growing larger by the day, and Tabi hardly noticed. Tabi hardly *thought*.

People had been disappearing, she had brought that up when the boys came to visit and she didn't connect those two extremely obvious dots?!

It was like, with each step through rainwater, a greasy film somewhere in Tabi's mind was being washed away. And the picture puzzle she was putting together, finally able to see clearly, was just as obvious as it was disturbing. Thelka, a self-proclaimed goddess, just *existed* in the same domestic space as her and she didn't question it—not that they lived in the same house, and not that proclamation? What even *was* a god?

(Certainly not someone who could misspell her own name.)

And Clara...

Yes, Grace hadn't been dangerous at all, but after what everyone had seen a mere day ago, how was anyone just accepting Clara after she expressed no remorse, no guilt?

Tabi kept running. It was hard—and harder for the others—but she had to think. She *had* to think, before the tides washed her away again, she had to break through. She had to think. It was a chant on time with the *pitter-patter* of the rain and the sound of footsteps behind her. She should've been thinking the whole time—something was keeping her, and the rain was pouring down so hard out here, and she was *cold*. But cold wasn't bad.

She found herself opening up to it, her body moving on its own as she tried her hardest to *think*. *Think*: something was wrong, and she needed it to change. Something different. *Think*: she needed a place to go, somewhere beyond that house to run to. Somewhere new. *Think*: somewhere with other people to talk to, people who didn't have to flounder and wade and drown in tides washing out identities. Somewhere solid.

And she knew where to go. More like: how to get where she wanted. Connections void of dots formed in her mind, understanding without context, and her body was drawn to that place her mind thought of. Knocked on a door she couldn't describe the directions to. Locked eyes with someone she didn't know the address of.

She felt faint. A phantom sensation of weight passed over her, like her head would simply roll off her shoulders if only she'd let it. She opened her mouth and words did not come.

Thank the gods— *whatever they might be* —for Dami.

Passing through the entryway of this house, Tabi kept her guard up. She would keep herself sharp, through all the worst the night had left to offer. Between the odd twitch that ran through their host—Oleander clearing his throat and choking on nothing, Tabi wondering just how much animosity remained between him and Winnie—and the Choicemaker setting fire to the railways of her train of thought with his abrupt and bloody entrance, she doubted she'd rest at all tonight. It was like his scalp was melting down his face. Last Tabi saw, Quiet wasn't moving much at all and couldn't possibly have given *himself* those head wounds.

Were things between the inhabitants of the house so wrong that they had sustained injuries? Borja had mentioned nothing about Quiet being hurt... and these wounds were far worse than a black eye and busted lip. Tabi had half the mind to call the hospital. *More* than half, when Quiet turned his head politely to cough and she caught a hint of *red*.

It was his eyes, too, the most striking thing. Grey and red did not mix well together. How was he *seeing* like that?

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Oleander choking, again, saying something that was possibly close to what she wanted to say. "What *happened*?"

Winnie acknowledged the sight with raised eyebrows. "You too, huh?"

Oleander was not so keen to let his question go, apparently. He procured a handkerchief—Tabi had no clue where from, was he just *carrying* that?— and wiped some blood on Quiet's forehead. It smeared, and was then quickly replaced by the trickling flow of yet more blood. He sucked in a breath through his teeth, asking, low and quiet, "what is *wrong* with the bathroom sink?"

Dami sucked in a breath, murmuring, "You can't be hurt like that and..." she paused, something flashing behind her eyes. "Can I help you somehow? Do you need a hug?"

Quiet startled at Dami's proposition, bloodshot eyes staring at her with an unreadable expression.

Tabi had a better question: why was nobody calling the hospital? Wait, should they have called the hospital for Winnie too? Why haven't they all seen a doctor yet?! Yes, Tabitha herself had survived years chained down with Skeptic, but that was not the point!

In the silence, Oli had drawn himself to his full height, glaring at Winnie even as blood, mixed with water, ran down her face. Green on green, across the room. None moved. None but Dami, oblivious to the tension between those two, taking a single step forward. Quiet inhaled, not sharply though certainly still in reaction—Tabi heard him cut himself off with a choking sound, a sound like drowning. His eyes were wide. Frozen.

It's funny; despite more of his eye being visible, Tabi only saw more red.

Dami paused. Considered. Said, "please don't hurt yourself."

A spell was broken. Quiet blinked, bloody tears trailing down his face, as he took a cautious step back and nodded. Dami nodded back, folding her hands together politely at her front, so Quiet could see them. Oleander tilted his head in a distinctively threatening way, sharp grin stuck on his face. Winnie grimaced back.

Oli gestured grandly as he let them pass, "after you, I insist."

A scoff turned into a cackle, mean and short, as Winnie took Oli's hand in her own. "And turn my back to you? After all we saw together, darling, you still think I'd grant you the opportunity to stab me in the back again?"

Tension increased as muscles twitched, Oli's grin nearly compromised as his arm pulled out of her hold. "Even face-to-face you found a way to stab us in the back. Well, in the throat, more like, wasn't it? All things considered, I think *you* can take a chance for a change."

Dami nodded at him as she strolled past without a care— she had to be doing that on purpose.

Something ugly passed over Winnie's face, expression too complex to name— and then she walked forward without another word. Quickly. As far from Oli as possible, it seemed to Tabi.

Which left Tabi, wasting no time getting somewhere dry. Finally grimacing at the feeling of wet socks. Finally, finally allowing herself to shiver. She needed a towel. And someone needed to look at Quiet's injuries, and she needed to talk about what happened back at the house.

Oleander closed the door. It felt final. It felt almost anticlimactic. Were Tabi in Oleander's place, she would've started asking questions. Or, she reassessed that thought hearing voices somewhere inside, she would lead them where the others were.

Which was what he was trying to do with Quiet, trying to tug him along but stopping just short of touching him. Sad and sick and just a little apologetic.

She let them lead her. The living room had chocolate couches and a sofa. An unlit fireplace. A multicolored rug. A table where mugs and mates and plates sat. It looked lived in, a book over there, a forgotten blanket there. A whiteboard. Written on it, in bold and capital letters, “HOW TO KILL GOD” and scribbled writing underneath.

Tabi paused.

Kept following, for now, with a mental note to worry about *that*, too, later. An ever-growing list.

A table with most of its chairs gone. Over there, in a circle, the chairs.

And them. Six pairs of eyes looked up at once and stared in one direction, just to the left of Tabi’s shoulder. Wide, uncomprehending eyes, in shock and not quite processing what it was they were looking at. Three pairs of eyes snapped up as one, not in the same direction—staring at *her*; then to her right. Narrowed, intentional stares; hostility came from them in waves. A break in the pattern as one pair of eyes in particular found hers, then lit up in surprised recognition. “Tabi—?”

Someone shouted, an urgent and disbelieving tone, but Tabi couldn’t hear over the sight of the grin breaking out on Skeptic’s face, over the warmth spreading on her own as she smiled at him in turn. The tide didn’t manage to wipe that away, at least. It never would. She very nearly forgot her place, leaning as if to take a step forward and join him as they’d settled in before.

Someone *hissed* at her. She blinked, remembering herself, and stopped where she stood.

The pattern was far from perfect. Unsynchronized from the rest of the crowd were two *strikingly* familiar faces in an unfamiliar place. One pair of sunken eyes, belonging to a wispy form floating above and drifting through the crowd, and one pair of burning eyes—flitting between the new arrivals of the room, not as much taking everyone in as she was sizing each of them up. Ava had an expression Tabi could only mark as somewhere between “delighted” and “horrified.”

Black eyes rose from the crowd, eyebrows furrowed and hands raised as if looking for something they might be able to do. Blue eyes nearly rose in his shadow, but stopped not unlike Tabi had stopped, slinking back down. Fernando steadily approached her left, and she glanced to see his eyes—and, thus, the others’—trained on Quiet’s face. It was a difficult set of injuries to hide.

Quiet, to his credit, reacted about as well as could be expected. He tilted his head in faux innocence, batting his eyes and incidentally allowing a few stray tears of blood to spill. Not that there was a way to salvage it, but he wasn’t a very good liar. He grinned anyway. Maybe he knew it; maybe that was the joke.

Whatever nonverbal message he was trying to communicate only seemed to tense Nando further. He whipped around with sudden conviction and pulled the largest man from the crowd, a man Tabi estimated to be about 90% muscle mass, amber eyes—and Ava following close behind him.

Nando and Gonchi passed her like she wasn't even there; in contrast, Ava flashed her a toothy grin. Tabi realized in passing she looked a lot more relaxed than she had ever seen her. Looser, more flexible. Energized...?

Between one blink and the next, they had gone to another room. Ciro gave Winnie a smile, bluish grey eyes wrinkling at the edges. Blue eyes focused on her right as Cain waved at her sister—and she shifted slightly, moving to block his line of sight. Dami was not in a state to be interacting with a stranger like him; not when Tabi couldn't gauge his intentions. Did he have any at all? Winnie turned back and snatched one of the unoccupied chairs, plopping herself in it.

“What are *they* doing here?” Paco, the one with the wide, bloody eyes spat.

She made a mental note of it. Bloody eyes, like Quiet... there had to be a connection somewhere. Was it a power leak, like Winnie had said? But his twin... Ave-something, had dried blood on his ears too... so that left...

The loudmouth, who hadn't said a thing. Oh, he was being very expressive with his gestures, but not one word.

She was just starting to notice how hard Dami was shivering. The bud on Winnie's forehead bloomed into a yellow rose. Tabi herself was getting the floor wet. “Can we get some towels?”

“Answer my question!” Paco *shrieked*, voice shrill and shaking. Tabi stepped in front of Dami.

“It's fine. He's just scared.” Dami murmured.

“Scared means unpredictable,” Tabi murmured back.

“Woah woah *woah* there boys,” Oli interjected, stepping between the two groups outright. “Let's not panic, alright? We have a couple good houseguests here and, well, I'm sure they'll be *very, very glad* to explain just what it is they're doing here *and how they found out where we lived* in juuust a few short moments. But for now let's all play nice and give them the common courtesy of some time to dry off. Then we can get nice and *comfortable* with each other, yeah? Go team?”

Tabi was not about to forget that was the same man who had drugged three monsters under the guise of playing nice, but fine, she'd play along. She needed, no, *deserved* a towel. She could deal with hostility in the meantime.

“I was wondering when you'd join us,” Grace smiled from above. “Poor me, surrounded by all this testosterone, that can't be good for the soul...”

Why was he trying to play good host? He had to know the boys outnumbered them two to one. They were in another territory. But no, he was ducking through a door and coming back with two fluffy blue towels.

Two.

Was *that* his play? Get the three girls to fight over two towels, make them pick each other off? Or was this a social test, a trap to have her ask and trip over some social faux pas and get her kicked out?

Ciro launched himself from his seat, pushed Oli out of the way and, very pointedly, took out another towel. Tabi found herself doing a double take-- what was happening to *his* eyes?!

“Oho, thank you, thank you friend,” Oli said, smoothly recovering with a not-so-smooth twirl, taking it from Ciro’s rigid hands. He clicked his tongue. “I am just so *forgetful* sometimes, my deepest and most meaningful apologies.”

A glance to Ciro’s face made it obvious he wasn’t buying it.

Tabi knew it would be smart to distangle her braid, but she was almost sure her hair would be a mess of knots no comb could brave through.

“Thank you,” Dami said for the three of them, all proper. She beamed as Oli handed the towels off to her. “Don’t worry; there’s always room to make up for your mistakes in the future! I believe in your ability to make the most of this second chance.”

Watching him stutter and freeze in place for a moment like some sort of wind-up toy was exceedingly satisfying.

Getting dry was less so (Tabi mourned the loss of her socks, too wet to be put back on). She could hear the twitchy and jumpy ones whispering at each other. The distinct impression of being talked about was a hard one to shake off.

Winnie was trying to muster up the wits to yank the flower out of her skin when the remaining boys, and Ava, returned. Quiet looked better. No wounds opening up. No wounds at all. Not even the faintest hint that they ever existed. That was... intriguing.

And apparently Paco’s cue to start interrogations back up again, if the glare in his eye was any indication. Tabi couldn’t remember promising to give up information, just Oleander volun-telling them to but, well. She supposed expectations got around.

“We’re sorry for coming here without an invitation—” Dami started. Hesitated.

“—but we were out of time to spare.” Tabi completed the sentence before her twin so much as glanced her way.

“How did you know where to find us?” Bang, bang, Paco got his question out like a machine gun. Tabi looked at him and felt her heart skip a beat. A shiver slid through her.

Paco was an empty glass waiting to be filled; transparent, yet not eager to be sipped from, only given to. If pushed too far, off an unseen edge, perhaps, his very form seemed to promise he would shatter into something sharper than steel and slice her open himself. She needed to be careful how far this one went.

Dami looked to Tabi. She opened her mouth— and closed it. Something pushed past her, a memory too far away to recall, a thought she never had. Tabi cast a glance at Dami, vying for time to come up with anything to give as an answer. Maybe, just...

She squared her shoulders and looked Paco in the eye. “We didn’t go out looking *for you*, in fact we didn’t go out looking for anything or anyone at all. Where we ended up wasn’t exactly high on our priority list,” she said, tilting her head forward and narrowing her eyes. “Your house is nearby. Your house opened its door when we knocked. Your house is where we ended up.”

“That’s a weird *coincidence*,” he spat at her.

“Is it?” Tabi shrugged, leaning back and inspecting her nails. She could still feel his eyes burning into her, even when she averted her gaze. “Or do you just *want* it to be weird?”

She needed to get off this question. She didn’t have an answer. Or— no, she *had* an answer, she just didn’t understand it. Couldn’t put it into words even if she wanted to. Her chest constricted a little at that; it felt *wrong* to do things without understanding how or why it happened. It felt unreal.

“They wouldn’t abandon their nest in this weather if it was safe to stay.” Ave chimed in.

“It wasn’t,” Tabi agreed readily.

“That’s just what they *want us to think*,” Paco ignored her, turning to Ave.

“No, no, the flighty one’s right,” Oli agreed, ignoring Ave’s indignant look. “We hold the cards here and *they know it*. They wouldn’t be here unless they needed something from us.”

Paco muttered something under his breath that sounded, to Tabi, like “something like our lives.”

“If something happened to make you need to run away,” Nando commented suddenly, his words slow and deliberate, “then where’s Felipe?”

Paco startled, frantically checking the room as if Felipe would suddenly appear within, as if the others simply missed him and he’d be making a grand entrance now that his name’s been announced. Tabi could practically *see* the accusation turning over in his mind, frantic and hasty.

Quiet was frowning, eyes overbright with sudden recognition, his focus on Dami. “Are you safe?”

She blinked, straightening her posture as all the room’s attention turned onto her. She fixed the wrinkles on her dress, minutely fidgeting under the weight of so many stares. “Uh... yes? I think?”

Not a good enough answer. Tabi tapped her on the shoulder. Her sister looked... confused, and conflicted.

“She’s *not*, ” Winnie piped up. Her tail lashed from side to side in irritation at having been made to volunteer information at all. “And before you go tossing crude accusations, it was one of *yours* that came to *us* with a blade behind his back and a shade in his step. You struck first. You started it!”

Quiet leaned back and down, like something was crushing him. “I’m sorry, I should have done something.”

“Hold on,” Skeptic said, raising a hand up. “Roll it back. From the beginning. Felipe... you’re saying Felipe did *what*, exactly?”

“Well, not *him*-him. If we go to the beginning I’d say the fuse was... What was the name of the big one?”

The atmosphere of the room changed. A silence passed over the room. It was the sound of something being held back. Tabi crossed her arms, waiting for the tension to break.

“This is the last time I listen to you,” Gonchi clenched his fists. “You should’ve let me keep going.”

Okay. So that part of Borja’s story was accurate, at least. Tabi cleared her throat, preparing to enlighten the rest of the room about their little double agent problem.

“He said someone has been lying about their...” Now that Tabi thought about it, the use of the possessive was strange. It reminded her of how Thelka had talked to ‘her’ priest. “About their ‘princess’.”

Quiet stiffened. Grace reacted. The spirit shot through the air as though pushed by an unseen wind, the curls of her hair billowing out in waves as her momentum carried her up and forward, dashing towards and swirling around Quiet. Circling them as though in orbit, her hands gracing his skin and pulling away in ritual play.

“What?” Grace gasped as she circled Quiet again, performatively. “Who? Not me! I wouldn’t lie about my killer.”

Got you. “I never said it was you.”

“You shouldn’t accuse a murder victim of lying about their killer, Tabi. How cold of you.” Grace said quickly, almost too quickly, her hair moving as though she were underwater. She finished her movements and came to a stop behind Quiet, resting her head on his. The picture was so perfect Tabi would almost assume Borja had to be lying, if only not because of how foundational it was to the rest of his confession to Thelka.

“What else did he say?” Skeptic cut in.

“That whoever it was that was lying was responsible for getting all the rest of us here,” Tabi continued with a breath. “Whomever it was has my thanks, for the record. I have an inkling of where I ended up which I’m not a fan of. I’ve seen as much with the others. Not exactly fond of being the little spoon.”

She caught Winnie nodding out of the corner of her eye. Quiet seemed to relax minutely by the change in topic. *Not quite yet.*

“He *also*—” Tabi took care to enunciate this next point well, “—said that ‘whoever’ was *running* from a certain *other* whomever. Whatever. Those details...” Tabi thought back to the whiteboard, the scribbles beneath, the circle of chairs. “...I didn’t get the best picture of. Too drowned out in an *agenda* I wasn’t inclined to listen to. We could enlighten each other. Turn this into a conversation, rather than an interrogation.”

Drip, drip, drip slid the rainwater into the glass.

“What sort of agen-” Skeptic was already saying. “Sorry. Carry on.”

“The details don’t matter. It’s past, now.” Tabitha glanced over to the solid wall of a man near the end of the room. Cold blue eyes regarded her with empty recognition. He blinked slowly, tiredly. Was he... bored?

“Politely disagree; we can get back to that. Point is: he was saying some things he really shouldn’t have been saying, especially not to the woman—” the title felt wrong, and Tabi reveled in it, “—he was telling them to. Thelka called him her pet.”

To Tabi’s shock, Quiet *nodded*. Like this was something he knew already. Something expected, even. Like she’d told him that it was raining outside, an obvious fact made apparent on several counts and not shocking in the slightest.

“A pet,” she repeated, trying to make them feel the same sort of horror as she. The room shuffled uncomfortably. Ave tilted his head to the side, blood luckily having dried so that none spilled out from his ear, then righted his position.

“He’s been trained,” is all he said.

Tabi... *could* call that haunting echo behind closed doors “training,” if she wanted to make herself sick. She stored the observation away somewhere she wouldn’t yet have to examine it.

“Disgusting.” was all Ava said.

“So,” Connie started, laughing nervously. “We’re just glossing over the fact that Her Royal Bitchiness was given the golden ticket to the worst event of our lives?”

Oli shot Connie a *look*. His grin died on his face.

“Backstabber,” Winnie muttered. Ciro pointed at her in an affirmative way, opened his mouth, and sent himself into a minor coughing fit. Tabi winced.

“As I said: I should’ve hit him harder.”

“I can hit him harder,” Ava said, shoving—well, more like punching Gonchi in the shoulder. She was rewarded by a genuine smile, actual gratefulness. And a reciprocated punch to the shoulder. It sounded *hard*.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Nando said, exhaling sharply. He was shaking in place, arms folded tight. Eyes like coals about to get lit. “The wellbeing of other people has never been a priority of his.”

Tabi tried to not look too interested about his sudden change in attitude. The cold eyes seemed to agree, switching targets.

“More interested in the attention of his goddess than he was attentive to everyone else involved,” he went on, emboldened by the attention. “Or maybe more attentive, just in the complete opposite way than any of us were supposed to be. Trying to convince us of...”

He shuddered, then. Closed his eyes like he was recalling a bad memory. Rolled his shoulders like he was shaking it off. Then he spoke, clearly biting in even more to say. “So no, I’m not surprised.”

“What else did he say?” Oli asked, trying to mask his tone. Maybe wanting more evidence to condemn. Maybe as angered as Winnie had been, earlier today, over revealed secrets.

“He talked about the thing in the dark.” Tabi dropped that bit of information with all the grace of dumping a bucket of icewater on an unsuspecting crowd. And looked. Watched. Studied.

Something shifted in Quiet’s expression, immediately. A distance in his eyes that wasn’t there before. Grace’s head dipped into and through Quiet’s, her form overlapping with his for a moment as she subtly glanced down at him, her face softening in covered concern.

In stark contrast, Nando shot up. His eyes *burning* into Tabi’s with an intensity she’d never seen in him before, his hands tensed as if preparing to do something, his entire body leaning forward on the edge of his seat.

There was a marked difference in the room once more. The temperature dropped, just slightly. Something in Connie’s expression hardened. Cain tilted his head, imperceptibly, to the side. Oli shifted from a polite, smiling host to a stone wall, equally unreadable yet markedly less personable. Ave grit his teeth, a low growl reverberating from his throat as Paco tensed into a compact wire beside him, moments away from springing. Ciro went still.

Oppressive. She couldn’t imagine why not, considering she had told them their secrets had been revealed in such a blatant violation of their most basic trust. Taking just a moment to see things from their perspective, well. Those exact reactions weren’t unjustified. She wondered if the glass was past half-empty quite yet.

“Did he, now?” Quiet asked. It was a flat tone. Disaffected. It almost reminded Tabi of herself, oddly enough. She wasn’t sure why.

Dami winced. “I’m sorry, we shouldn’t have—”

“It hurt you.” It was Tabi’s only question. It wasn’t really a question.

Quiet... paused. She took the turning gears in his head as her answer. He opened his mouth, but Tabi didn't need to hear it, so she continued.

"It hurt you and you left." She nodded, to herself or to him she wasn't sure, but the nod was intentional nonetheless. "You brought us all here. Away from it. He tried to make it sound... different, but the truth was hidden between the lines."

As if he'd done so all his life, Nando took the briefest of moments to turn his head and ask Quiet, the same way she'd heard him back at her house, "Still with me?"

"I hurt Her, too," Quiet said, softly. Like the words were a confession. "That's what he was saying. It's true. We... made each other worse."

A sudden rise in volume throughout the room as many voices started speaking out of turn. Tabi tried to sharpen her hearing to the best of her ability. Oddly enough, it wasn't the loudest voice she latched onto; just the most distinctive. A silver tongue with a certain inflection fit for negotiations.

"You got all of us out even after she 'made you worse'. Now listen, listen, *listen* here," the noise in the room died down the slightest bit, "I'd say regardless of anything, who did what or what started how or whose knife ended up in whose back, nowadays we're looking a whole lot *better*, eh? We're all in need of a good forward-thinking mindset. I'm a bit of a visionary, you know—"

"Stop breathing," Cain said. "You're stealing the air from useful people."

That brought the noise to a screeching halt.

"Did you just make a joke?"

"No."

Tabi hoped that was a joke. That he had somehow developed a sense of humor.

"If you made each other worse that just means you weren't a good match, and she was an idiot for forcing it." Ava shrugged. Tabi stared at her— since when had *she* known?! Ava glanced at her and winked. *What?* Quiet looked bewildered, too.

"I guess the bird's out of the bag, now."

"It was never going to last long."

"One thing after another in the bullshit factory," one particularly scratched-out voice managed to strain out before dissolving into bloody, violent choking. Tabi's throat itched in sympathy -- or maybe that was a consequence of walking in the rain.

It was nice, at least, to have something confirmed. Even if some questions still remained: if Quiet was the Decider, why was Grace still claiming him?

“No! Enough chitchatting. You still haven’t answered my question,” Paco spoke in a burst, words flying out in a single breath as if he’d been holding them back ever since the conversation started. “Why are you here? How did you *find* us? We’re being *pursued* and all of you are acting like *Her* little *spies* aren’t *here to pick us off*!”

Tabi tried to make herself not react to yet another impulsive accusation. She couldn’t.

Winnie hissed at him. “We were *warning you* of an information leak and that’s how you repay us?!”

“You *are the information leak*!” Paco’s voice was getting shriller by the second. Tabi hadn’t seen him inhale since he started talking. He was simultaneously pressing himself flat against his seat and seemed to be preparing to attack. “Stop acting like we’re friends! Stop acting like we *know* each other! I don’t know you, I can’t *trust* you!”

Quiet tried to take a few steadying breaths. “Paco, I can’t... *think* if you’re that anxious...”

“You need to be anxious, you’re—we’re in *danger*!” Paco turned on Quiet, spring finally set, leaping up to him like a bomb had been set off and he was his cover. “She came to Nando! She found him! She found us!”

“Paco!” Nando snapped, eyes wide. Alert. Guilty.

“That was a fading dream, nothing more,” Cain said, but wasn’t heard over the torrential downpour. The glass was filled past its brim, water leaking down its edges, and now it was fit to shatter from the stress. Most of the others were too busy recriminating Paco for what he just did. Tabi and Winnie shared a glance, keeping secrets from their leader?

“Breathe,” Quiet said, voice not as steady, “Fernando, what is he talking about?”

“I saw her last night,” Nando shuddered in visceral disgust. “She thought I was hiding you. Refused to entertain the idea you’d left by your own choice.”

“He denied her twice!” Connie added, something very close to admiration in his voice.

“A proud showing to an old memory,” Cain narrated. “But of no concern beyond.”

“It *was* a stress dream,” Nando exhaled, glancing at the rest of the room, then looking Quiet dead in the eyes. “It might not have meant anything. The details can come, just... not here.”

With all they had learned, if it was a stress dream, Tabi would eat her braid.

“The thing in the dark is a God,” Quiet started with all the subtlety of a murder of crows in a cemetery. “She’s most of Transformation, the Tides of Change, the High and Lows, She Who Works Her Will. Etcétera.”

“Why are you her shard?” Winnie asked. All of her was still. Her tail, her eyes, even her growing buds had stopped.

“He’s not her anything.” Nando frowned.

“I’m Her other half,” Quiet answered over Nando.

Ciro was waving his hands negatorily. He pointed to Quiet and made a slit-throat gesture, paused, then seemed to think better of that gesture and just started shaking his head frantically. Gonchi patted him on the back. Ciro swallowed thickly.

“You’re her brother?” Dami asked. Tabi was a bit surprised to note she had already dried completely.

“Do I look like—?”

The sound of a clearing throat. Winds rushing in at mach 5.

“No, ni en pedo. We’re not fucking going over all of this bullshit again, and *he*—” Ciro pointed at Quiet, again, with somehow greater force now with his impossibly clear voice behind it, “—is not going to be subjected to these repetitive fucking questions. I’d rather burn to death than be related to Miss Goddamn Fifty-Dozen Knives Would Make A Fine Couple’s Outing, and I’m sure she’d have it arranged like the psychopath she is if she ever heard the idea. Ugly fuckers, the lot of them. No, triple-decker fuck that, *get him out of here*. We aren’t goddamn siblings and she is goddamn nothing at all to us and we’ll have it stay that way thank-you-very-much.”

Tabi blinked. “Thank you.”

“No, de nada,” he then blinked. “Well what are you waiting for? ¡FUERA!”

Quiet shook his head, eyebrows raised in bafflement. “¡Ni nunca!”

“There’s no need for you to talk about all that again. Get out.”

“¡Ni nunca!”

“Stop quoting books at me!”

“¡Ni nunca!” Quiet laughed.

“That’s it. Gonchi,” and he rose, “do what you have to.”

Gonchi did not hesitate in approaching Quiet with force. Apparently guessing his preferred method of dealing with people who needed to be moved, Quiet literally dug his heels into the legs of his chair and, pivoting his ankles, hooked his feet onto it. Gonchi laughed at the stubborn showing, went around, and *lifted* both man and chair readily off the ground. Grace pulled back, stunned, merely floating in place as “her” shard was carried away.

The sound Quiet made, if Tabi had to be completely honest, was nothing short of hysterical. She covered her mouth with her hand to muffle what laughter escaped her. She didn’t want Quiet to think she was laughing at *him*, she was just...

“Get the door for me?” Gonchi said over his shoulder as though he were simply carrying a bag of groceries.

“Got it,” Ava replied, sprinting to the door. Gonchi walked through, nodding to her, and deposited the goods. Then Ava slammed the door before said deposited goods could jump from his hand-made chair prison and rush back into the room.

...she was laughing at the absurdity of the situation. Winnie too, apparently. Those cackles were hard to miss.

Grace, stranded, drifted over to Nando’s side, who looked just as stunned.

“Now,” Ciro huffed, turning on his heels to stare down the rest of the group. “Do any of you know how fucking frustrating it is to listen to a parade of bullshit bumble about in front of your face and be unable to scream at it?” He snapped his fingers, pointing to Skeptic. “You. You have notes. Summarize this shit. And *you*—” he turned to Oli “—*please* shut the fuck up.”

Tabi was not ashamed to admit she noticeably perked up at the idea of comparing notes. A hint of something like normalcy, after the day she’d had? Yes please. Especially with someone who could understand her.

“You do know he’s listening from behind the door.” Ave was very still, like he was listening for something.

Paco still didn’t seem like he wanted to calm down. “Of course he is!”

“I’d do the same thing.” Skeptic admitted.

“Who wouldn’t?” Oli said.

“We *are* talking about him.” Winnie joined in.

“No, because he actually listens to me!” Paco ground out, frustrated.

“Nevermind all that, how does that Thing being a god equal us getting killed?”

Skeptic paused. Looked up at Tabi, then back down to his notes, flipping through them. Paco opened his mouth once again but was prevented from saying anything by Ava’s timely intervention of simply putting a hand over his mouth. It, obviously, didn’t calm him down any, with how he started trying to make her let go with elbows and sharp angles.

“Stop that,” Dami said, aghast, “That’s not helping!”

“No, she’s right,” Winnie backed her up. If it had been anyone else, Tabi would’ve thought she was worried. It was strange to see both of them agreeing on something.

Ava glanced between them both and then, dangerously, fixed Paco with a hard stare... and slowly let him go. He fumbled out of her grip the moment the opportunity presented itself, nearly tripping over himself in both his haste to create distance between them both and his insistence on never letting her out of his sight. Tabi wondered why he wouldn’t turn around to flee—and then stopped wondering. She got her answer the other night.

Paco seemed to forfeit his ability to speak in favor of simply trying to breathe. This strategy of shutting him up, Tabi observed, was effective—though not entirely ethical. She saw Dami shaking her head at Ava in disapproval in her peripherals. Ava wilted at the sight, glancing back over to Paco's trembling form, huddling against Ciro. Whispering.

"You're clearly the same thing as we are," Cain started as an explanation.

That would have worked better if she didn't know they were very different things. Tabi and the other girls had bodies since the beginning, for one, and for two, they hadn't spawned from something else. Seemed, instead, like the something else took them in.

"Godly?" Damiana brought a hand to her chin. "That would explain the fire..." her eyes went wide at the same time Nando's glare turned to her. "And h-his hands..."

"They certainly have power leaks of *their* own," Tabi said, tapping the side of her seat in a steady rhythm as she thought. "I watched them disappear into thin air the other night."

Winnie squaked indignantly. "What? That's not fair! How come we're cursed with these useless, annoying, obvious troubles and they get such useful tricks to hide up their sleeves?"

"Leak? That wasn't a leak." Ciro said, as if he had insider information on the matter. How intriguing.

"What does she mean, '*fire*'?" Paco hissed. He glanced in the direction Quiet used to be, then to the door—then, slightly off, like something was next to the door. Tabi glanced over to see Oli standing suspiciously straight next to the door, like he'd been leaning into it and just barely stood up in time to get caught by Tabi anyway.

Not that his innocent face was convincing, anyhow.

"A dream— no, not a dream," Damiana corrected herself. "I think I did something."

"You made scorch marks on the sheets." Tabi blurted out.

Dami whipped her head to stare at her. "You wet the bed but I didn't want to make a big deal out of it!"

The sound that erupted out of Connie was not human.

"Not what you think it is," Tabi coolly responded in the most level tone she could manage. Her attempt at stoicism only made Connie laugh harder.

Tabi took great care to not look in Skeptic's direction.

"That's ridiculous." she told Cain. "We aren't part of Her and you're not part of him."

She didn't know what to think about Quiet being the Decider. The name matched, she supposed, but between the presence, the personality he chose to portray, and even his appearance (long he was not), he didn't look like the one that had tried to help Tabitha in the basement. Maybe that was the point.

Cain's lips upturned. Tabi hesitated to call it a smile. It didn't look right, neither on his face nor in the form of it.

"Weren't we?" Cain's voice, as it turned out, upturned much like his lips—in an odd expression, not falling neatly into any emotional category. Rhetorical? Amused? Was that a genuine question?

There was murmurs in the group equal parts dissenting and agreeing.

"He doesn't think that," Skeptic said. "We wouldn't be here if he did."

"We were *together*, I don't think that counts as being a *part* of him," Ciro said. "Stuck together."

"We all share parts of each other," Ave said. "Parts of the flock. That's how it works."

"I think we're all fairly independent," Oli started in a tone that had Tabi wondering when he'd stop. "Free spirits. Free *birds*, you could say—"

"Could! Could *not*, too," Connie interrupted. "I don't know about the whole 'parts of a whole' thing, personally, seems so technical. I think we're just all ourselves! Why worry about the details?"

"Of course," Cain agreed readily as if he'd been waiting for it. "We exist. That's all that matters."

"I don't like it when you put it like *that*," Connie said, quieter.

"Is that not what you said?"

"Would it kill you to stop being a dick?" Gonchi said.

"We were just thoughts to Her," Winnie said. "Not even people."

"We—" Dami sputtered suddenly, taking a harsh breath in. "We were giving her our perspectives, it was—gifts! She was... learning from us, I think. Learning how to be a person. Or to try and be like one?"

Ava stood. Paco *flinched*, violently, so hard that his chair scraped on the floor and he nearly toppled straight out of it.

"Cool it with the sudden movements," Ciro said as he grabbed Paco's shoulders to steady him.

Ava cleared her throat. It was more like a guttural cry than a genuine attempt at dislodging anything. An announcement to the room: *Ava is speaking now*. "I remember it," she said, her voice unapologetically loud. "I remember what it felt like. It was this crushing feeling, like the whole world was laying right on top of me. This pressure on my head. But the pain of it wasn't good, it didn't feel like pain at all, I couldn't... *move*. Or the weight didn't want me to think I could move, but I'd be damned before I let some pressure get to me."

“You’re a monster under pressure,” Gonchi said, standing up to grab at her wrist. She nodded at him, flashing a smile with teeth.

“Straight from hell. So I pushed. I pushed against that damned whatever-it-was, pushed harder and harder like my life depended on it, like if I didn’t everything was going to give out from under me. And the pressure pushed back, waves of it, almost like... like...”

“An ocean?” Connie offered.

“Yeah! Yeah, like an *ocean*, just crashing against me. Absolute annihilation. Like it wanted me *gone*, thought it could push me out of myself. Like hell I was letting it. And the harder I pushed the more I could feel, the less it felt like I was stuck, frozen in place, the more I could almost start to see and breathe and be alive.”

Tabi saw glances being exchanged by some of the boys. A heaviness in the air. Almost like a mourning.

“Was it good?” Gonchi asked.

“Nothing was good without you,” Ava answered without a moment of hesitation. “I knew it. I needed to get back to you. Whatever it was, this ocean, it was keeping me from you, and that wasn’t what I was about. That’s not what we fought for. That wasn’t our destiny. That wasn’t *mine*. I had a purpose and it was *you*, not what the ocean said it was.”

“How...” Skeptic paused, taking a long breath. “How long did you...?”

“Oh, I never stopped,” Ava said. “I would’ve went forever.”

What were these glances? Jealousy? Envy? Nando looked almost sick. But Gonchi...

...Gonchi, she couldn’t put a name to that expression. It was something beyond words entirely. “Adoration” didn’t come close. “Pride” wasn’t intense enough.

Cain scoffed. “Like it was hard.”

“Damn straight,” Ava nodded, then grimaced. “Hardest fight of my life. Didn’t feel good for one bit of it. I started feeling these... things, around me. Like worms, but not warm. Cold. Or — no, I guess they were fingers, huh? Bunch of arms on top of each other. That was... wrong. Cold. I’d get up to that and...”

Ava, uncharacteristically, went quiet. Gonchi rubbed her arms. Tabi glanced at Dami, fidgeting in her seat.

“...I... I wouldn’t stop, not too long. I’d get back up. I wasn’t succumbing to *that*. If the ocean wanted to do me in, it’d have to try harder than scare tactics. I wasn’t about to do *myself* in, either, when I passed the bodies and started hearing it talk back to me. Ha! Words and music aren’t anything if it wasn’t going to commit to the dance, too.” No mistake, Nando flinched at that. “Sometimes I’d get hot enough, out of the cold, to even tell it that.”

“Point *is*, ” Ava gritted her teeth like she was angry at having spoken so long. “The ocean ain’t shit, and my man was a way better fight.”

Gonzalo was, for a lack of a better word, preening. His whole being exuded self satisfaction, blond hair seeming to almost glow under the light.

“Back to your *information leak*...” Winnie seemed to think enough was enough in terms of processing. Her bangs were intermingled with pretty flowers. Tabi considered telling her about this, then considered how sharp Winnie’s nails were. (Dami informed her as much after an *attempt* at Girls’ Night.) “We know how the ocean feels about us— it’s a cruel and sadistic and terrible monster—but the little traitor in your midst let spill a lot more details about how it liked your Choicemaker, too. And then it sided with the water.”

Predictably, Gonchi’s hand, the one that wasn’t clutching Ava’s, curled into a fist. More surprisingly, Nando’s did too. His hands were *shaking*.

“I recall *someone* calling him ‘our’ Choicemaker,” Grace grinned at Nando’s side.

“That—!” Winnie clammed up, her tail lashing behind her so fast Tabi wondered if she was maybe trying to sweep the floor. “That was different!”

There was a slight knocking at the door. Tabi turned to see Oli not-so-subtly leaning into it, pressing his whole ear against the wood.

“Of course, love hurts m—” he stopped himself, horrified, staring at the door. “No? No. *No*. It doesn’t.”

“What?” Ciro belted. “What did he say?”

“Something *wrong*. ”

Tabi thought she could hear the pitter patter of someone rushing away. Just in case.

“The little snitch said he’d make your Choicemaker ‘understand’.”

“Understand what?”

“If I know him, and I think I do, the answer is ‘his place.’” Nando said, and his voice was hoarfrost, a jarring contrast to his overall posture. “He practically said as much before Ciro and Gonzalo did... Whatever they did. I wasn’t paying attention to them.”

“His place by her side,” Tabi finished. Nando snapped his eyes to hers at the words. She was accurate, then? She didn’t need the confirmation.

Considering what Tabi had seen of how Thelka treated him, it made sense.

Winnie started plucking petals off a bud on her wrist, “...Thelka wasn’t the only one he talked to.”

Grace’s eyes went wide a moment later. “Fuck.”

“Time for another go at the shit factory. What else went wrong?”

“Your other missing piece, who else do you think?”

Gonzalo chuckled. “Come on, what can Feli do?”

The door, judging by the slamming noises coming from the other side, was shockingly durable. It was something between a drum and a cannon shot. Or a bomb. It sounded painful.

A few of the boys were shaking their heads as if to disperse flies.

“¡Me van a dejar pasar ya!” came from behind.

Ciro smiled, sensing an opportunity, Connie already gwaffing. “¡Ni nunca!”

“Please!”

Ciro went from smiling to dead-faced in an instant. He rushed for the door, but Oli was closer, and it *slammed* open with such a fervent pace Tabi half-thought it were supernatural in origin. Quiet came through quick as an exhalation, one second pouring through the door and the next—right by Dami. Breathless, glossy-eyed, hair a mess.

“You said you were safe,” he said without air.

For a moment, she couldn’t speak, stunned. “I—I’m right here, see?”

“I shouldn’t have let him—I’m so sorry—I didn’t—I should’ve stopped him,” Quiet spoke, his inflections messy, his tone messier. Like a tea kettle. He took a large step back from Dami, his hands raised close to his chest. “You weren’t safe, I wasn’t thinking, I was—this is my fault, I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have been alone with him—”

That was enough. “She *wasn’t* alone with him,” Tabi snapped, offended at the attack on her sisterly protection. “Like I would let him? Mr. Pushy? With *my* sister?”

Something in Quiet seemed to deflate. He almost stumbled like a marionette with its strings cut. *Relief*. He stared at Tabi for a long moment. It was almost nostalgic, the unreadability of his face, the long silence. Then, “thank you.”

Then, what he had said finally got through her brain. He wouldn’t be so scared of something happening to her sister if he didn’t have proof. Knowledge. Experience.

“I knew he was too good to be true, I *knew it!*” Winnie whispered to herself. Then, in a slightly louder voice, “what is it he wanted from her, huh? What was the benefit for himself? Money? Prestige? A back good for storing knives in?!”

“He didn’t need knives.” His hands went to cover his chest.

Grace dropped down from above. Tabi could see him through her. “What did he do?”

Despite being incorporeal, Tabi got the feeling, for the first time, that Grace was someone that could hurt. She hoped it wasn't like Clara.

"It wasn't just him, it was my fault just as much—"

"Like hell it was!" Ciro spat, interrupting Quiet.

"You weren't there!" Quiet said, as though angered by the defense. "It was my suggestion!"

He paused, then, hunching in on himself as he turned to Tabi, then back to Dami. His hands flexed but stayed in place, like he didn't have the right to touch her but wanted to hold her hands in comfort nonetheless. Tabi took her sister's hand in his place. She wasn't sure where this was going.

'Suggestion.' Wasn't he the 'Decider'?

"It was my fault. I didn't know if the threat of the world ending was completely false, so Hero suggested we stayed in the cabin. I thought maybe we could've been happy there. I didn't put much thought behind it. You had grown..." he paused there, looking for the right word the way someone would look for a specific ant in an ant trail. "Strange. Still, you weren't happy with what I said as neither of us knew each other, and Smitten didn't... take it well."

"I hurt him?"

"No," Quiet huffed. "Well, you—you didn't do anything wrong. You just said something you wanted to say. Something honest. And he... Maybe it would be better if you heard it. I think I can pull it off."

Quiet cleared his throat and—something in the room shifted. No, everything in the room was the same. Wasn't the same. Was wrong in some uncanny, unidentifiable way. The lines weren't converging the same. The lines, the borders between spaces, the empty space between the air molecules, the sound of Tabi's own pulse in her ears, everyday breathing, something unspoken and unseen and unidentifiable... unfurled imperceptibly. He opened his mouth and spoke in a voice that was his, but not quite, filtered in some way that had it come out—

"It has to be Him! if we- if we just *made these walls more fitting for a princess*, if we say the right things, if--! *If we just showed her **the contents of our heart**, she'd be happy here.*"

—so terribly, distinctly familiar. Tone wrong. Tone right. Felipe, but not him at all, but everything besides his tone pointing to that name. Missing the boisterousness, it was jagged and paranoid and frantic, yet impossibly cool near the end, like a raging fire had been contained and compressed into a single ever-burning coal set to burst at a moment's notice.

She saw a shiver like a wave pass through the room, each man pulled up straight by unseen strings as a collective horror washed through their faces. Something like recognition passed through Nando's eyes, animus and offended. And yet Tabi felt nothing, nothing at all.

Quiet's hands covered his chest again, but he continued to speak as though possessed.

"Don't mind my sacrifice. It's a fair price to pay to give her *everything she doesn't know she wants*."

The room came back into focus, normal and right and real, as Quiet reeled back.

"Never do that again," Ciro requested. Quiet smiled briefly. He was probably going to do it again. Tabi hoped it wouldn't be so sickening next time. The words were disturbing. She imagined his actions would be worse.

"He killed us. Ripped out—" his expression twitched painfully, "—our heart without us deciding that was something we wanted to do. Framed it in our ribs like a ritual offering, a proposal of marrow and blood."

For a heartbeat, nobody spoke, and the silence was *loud*.

"I didn't know we could do that," Cain said as if he'd just read a fun fact on a candy wrapper.

Nando blinked. Stared into the open air like he was seeing something in its shape. "I had an idea," he responded uneasily. He swallowed. Another couple heartbeats of loud silence, pressing in on Tabi's chest and emptying the room of its air, a silence not inclined to break except through exceptional force.

"What is wrong with you two?!" Ciro *exploded*, and the vacuum was erased. "No, we *shouldn't* have been able to 'do that.' We could do things but *that*? That? That's bullshit! We could get the little things, keep ourselves armed, but it's not like we could take that blade and drive it through our own chest!"

Nando wheezed. It was a shaky thing.

"We kind of *did* do that?" Connie said.

"Yes, I suppose so," Cain agreed, and Connie very pointedly did not look in his direction.

"No, we *suggested* it, you said as much! Guys like us didn't make decisions, that was the whole fucking point of the whole arrangement, wasn't it?!"

Hah. 'Point.' Tabi kept that one for herself, hoping for a better reception to her little interruption. Really, she was interrupting an interruption and getting this circus back on track. "Enough. Clearly he was a threat to you. Now, how was he a threat to *my sister*? What was that about 'giving her what she didn't know she wanted?'"

An idea *immediately* shot through Tabi's head as soon as she finished her last question, and she gripped Dami's hand in her own with such force she wondered, for a moment, if she was hurting her. She elected to wrap her arm around Dami's shoulders instead, squeezing her tight in a sort of half-hug. Dami leaned into it. It felt a little better.

"You... sort of liked it. My heart." Quiet said that absolutely insane thing apologetically. "Said it was beautiful."

“No!” Dami shouted. “It’s not! It’s not beautiful. It’s—it’s *scary*! I don’t want him, or you, or anyone to be hurt. I want you to be okay, I just...”

Quiet tensed. Why?

“I just want everyone to be okay,” Dami muttered, suddenly losing her steam, slumping into Tabi’s side, curling into herself uncertainly.

“What did he *do*?” She asked again, lower in volume, intentional in tone.

“Redecorated the whole place. Made her feasts. Didn't let her leave.”

“That last one, what do you *mean* by that?” Tabi asked. Dami opened her mouth to speak but only managed a nervous hum that did nothing to put her at ease. “Dami?”

“I didn't mean to scare you.”

It was a little too late for that.

“He... he didn’t want me... to leave?” Dami said beneath her breath. “But I left. I’m not with him right now. He’s on his own. I left him on his own, and he hurt himself—”

Dami stood. Tabi’s hand trailed after her, and then she rose with her sister, a pit forming in her stomach. “Dami?”

“He’s not okay. He let me hurt him and then you’re saying he hurt you and he’s— he’s going to hurt himself, he can’t do that and be okay, I have to get back,” she rambled, suddenly making her way to the end of the room. Tabi followed, Skeptic standing up, Oli blocking her way to the door with his arm, uncertainty displaying clearly in his face, glancing over to Quiet. “I messed up. I messed up! He needs to see me, I’m hurting him again and it’s— I’m sorry, please move— either you or him, but he won’t hurt me, he loves me, I’m supposed to be there for him—”

“Dami!” Tabi yelled, grabbing her sister’s wrist. She jumped.

“I’m sorry!”

Tabi swore she could feel her heart break. She had always thought that was a metaphor, but she was finding out the pain was real.

Ava looked at her with raised eyebrows. Asking if she had to restrain her too. If that came to it Tabi hoped for her sake that Ava was... Gentler, in her approach.

"Why?"

Dami flinched and stopped dead, staring at Cain unsure and almost afraid. Tabi couldn’t blame her, she had almost forgotten he was there.

“Don’t scare me like that.”

Cain tilted his head, barely. "How *should* I scare you?"

Dami shook her head. "What do you mean 'why'? He might get hurt because of me! He might hurt someone else because of me! I can't let that happen!"

"You aren't responsible for him. He isn't leashed to you. Are you leashed to him? Do you come to his beckon at any moment's notice like a trained dog?"

Winnie's fur stood on end. "You didn't just say that."

"I did. Are you going to do something about it?"

"I will, you--" she almost yelped when Tabi caught her tail with her free hand.

A "pet," Thelka called Borja. Dami... was not that. Would not be turned into that. She wouldn't allow it.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. And if he hurts himself in your absence..." Cain leaned forward, a sudden interest lighting up his face as he stared through Dami. "I suppose that's one concern taking care of itself."

Dami's eyes reflected pure horror. "How can you say that?!"

Tabi got the impression, despite his persistent eye contact, that Cain wasn't seeing Dami at all. Or, if he was, it was a sight too deep and distant to be accurate to her core. Still, his eyes dimmed somewhat in response to her question. "It's rather straightforward," he elaborated, folding his hands together. "You don't need to care about him. He clearly doesn't care for himself."

"Someone needs to be on his side!"

"It's not going to be you."

Tabi did not like that proclamation. Even if she might've agreed with it. She turned Dami to face her instead of Cain because his eyes were starting to unsettle her. They looked... inanimate. "What he *means*," Tabi said, not knowing but choosing to assume, "is that *you* are staying right here, with us, young missie. If what Quiet says is true, you need to keep away from him as long as this little phase lasts."

And maybe for a good while after that, she did not add.

"Stop freaking her out, you chilly little freak!" honestly, Tabi was liking Gonchi more and more.

"She was 'freaked out' by the whole ordeal," Cain responded. "I'm giving her an option to be more than that. If you have no other ideas," he shrugged, "I suppose mine's the only one that counts."

"That's not even an idea, that's just letting things happen." Skeptic pointed out.

“Letting her succumb to the burning of her heart is ‘letting things happen.’” Cain rolled his eyes. “I suppose it doesn’t matter either way. She won’t feel anything for him in the end.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The ‘chapter’ had to end somehow, didn’t it?”

All at once, the attention was on Quiet again. He looked pale under the stares. “We were just... seated. You weren’t harmed phys— No, he held you down once or twice—”

“He did *what*. ”

“No no, he did it to me, too, it’s fine,” Quiet said quickly, waving his hands dismissively. “He didn’t let you leave, he didn’t let me leave. He grabbed our wrists and made us remain seated. Gave us... everything we were ‘supposed to have wanted,’ I think he said? I only had you to go off of. He wouldn’t talk to me.”

‘Supposed to have wanted’? Tabitha knew her sister enough to know she wasn’t one for grand romantic gestures or stuff like that. She was happy enough cooking apple strudel, being out in the sun. Things like that. Nobody said simple desires couldn’t be beautiful.

“What’s that? Did the ‘Voice of the’ prefix mean nothing now?” Tabi griped.

“You told me he said his words were only for you. That he was the voice who whispered sweet nothings in your ear.”

“Huh?” Gonzalo raised an eyebrow. “She took him with her?”

“My mistake. She touched my heart— literally— and he... poured out of me,” Quiet said, staring up towards the far wall. “The threads of my body ‘covering the surface of the room’ and reaching towards her in reciprocation of her outstretched hand.

“He became her shadow. I couldn’t hear him anymore — he didn’t want me to. He was outside of me. *Tired* of me.” Tabi didn’t know what to make of that tone. Resignation? Defeat?

“Why didn’t you run?”

“I tried,” his voice cracked. “There wasn’t a door. Or windows. We started at the cabin already. No blade in sight.”

Skeptic perked up, “Like-”

“With the Thorn, yes, Harri,” his gaze was fond for a moment. *What was that name...?*
“Maybe Felipe took me there... I’m not sure...”

“No doors or windows?” Paco interrupted. “That’s not a cabin. That’s a tomb.”

“No, Paco, tombs go down. We went up instead. It really threw Him off his rhythm.”

Tabi felt a small jolt at the acknowledgement of *Him*. He who forced Quiet to try and kill Dami—He who *succeeded*, with Winnie. And He who, if Tabi could guess, was what forced her to slit her would-be savior's throat for her own self-preservation.

It was odd, to share in the mutual feeling of *animosity* that charged the room at the mere passing mention of *Him*. Looks like they all had something in common after all.

“You called us from upstairs, saying dinner was ready.”

Dami smiled very slightly. “My apple strudel?”

“...I'd love to try it sometime. There *was* an approximation of what might've been an apple. Cakes, desserts, but no, not strudel. Assortments of vegetables, varieties of bread, a centerpiece of a whole roasted bird with many wings--”

He stopped at Ave's gasp. “What did I say?”

Ave put a hand over his mouth, then shook his head.

“All done by Felipe himself,” Quiet finished narrating after a moment.

Cain spoke, his head resting on his hand, “So that was the torture.”

“Rude!” Dami admonished, just as Oli piped up, “at least it sounded like a good spread! There had to be *something* good to try in it.”

“The table was so long I could barely see you on the other end. A new dress and the blade worn as a necklace.”

“Interes— no no, sorry, *exciting* fashion choice...” Connie tried to laugh.

“Never been fond of necklaces,” Tabi said, putting her hand up to her throat to adjust a phantom weight. “Still. A weapon so close... you could use it to defend yourself, if it detached, broke away somehow.”

“Why would the creep allow her that?” Winnie wondered. “A weapon in line of sight... he'd only need to get close.”

“Maybe that was it, then,” Quiet sighed. “A statement on how safe, how happy, he'd promised to keep us, that she could have a blade pointed right at her heart and be in no danger of death at all. That we would never die again.”

“You died because of him last time,” Winnie pointed out.

“And I never died,” Dami said, softer.

“Then... that I would never hurt her. Never be forced to. Never be able to...” Quiet went silent for a moment, unblinking. He sucked in a breath, harsh, and let it out, slow, shaky.

“How hard is it to throw a knife without me?” Connie wondered, before flinching at the glares thrown his way, “I was just thinking aloud!”

“The knife had nothing to connect *to*, Connie.” Quiet smiled despite himself, despite the abysmal circumstances he was describing. “I wasn’t joking when I said he became Dami’s shadow. He towered over her, over double her height, with long claws the size of her head hanging down at her either side. No muscle, no eyes. Just the absence of light, and sometimes a smile.”

“How’s that fair, there was nothing you could...” Ciro started, then stumbled over himself, winds whistling in their weakness, “do.”

At the mention of claws, Tabitha felt her heartbeat speeding up, and once again the air grew tense between the boys and the ghost by Quiet’s side. She could read the mood just fine, if he had hurt Quiet *he’d have to answer to them*. Tabi hoped her twin wasn’t included in that threat. Hoped she was safe from that protectiveness for Quiet’s safety, in the vain hope that Dami’s safety had not also been compromised... No. That was blindly optimistic. Tabi hoped her twin was included as a second person to answer for.

She wondered, morbidly, if she let escape that Felipe had hurt Damiana, how many of the ones that were left behind at her house would react to that, and how. Winnie already looked prepared to commit a murder.

“Was there no way of speaking with him? Did I really have no ideas?” Nando spoke for the first time in a while.

“We had to talk to you to leave,” Grace said, “but he wasn’t planning on letting you go. He wanted you to stay. So he wouldn’t *need* to talk to you.”

“But... why?” Nando asked. “Why go through all this effort for us just to ignore us?”

“We weren’t his main priority,” Quiet sighed. “I wouldn’t have liked him to speak to me like he spoke to her, anyway.”

A moment of silence as the implication sunk in.

“Was it... good? The dinner,” Dami asked hesitantly, softly.

“Oh,” Quiet sighed, leaning down as if telling a secret, or preparing for a long, long conversation. “It was indescribable.”

“In what way?” Paco asked, on the edge of his seat. “Was it— was it poisoned, or...?”

A glance across the room, and Paco and Ave locked eyes.

“It was the best meal I ever had,” Quiet said as though recalling a memory, fondness and nostalgia tinted just barely by regret and mourning. “Nothing could compare. Nothing would ever taste that good again, not even the same meal. And I would know; I had that same meal, multiple times. He kept feeding us perfection... but it wasn’t the meal itself. Just... that

experience, of eating for the first time, of having something prepared just for me and sitting down for something warm and cooked and seasoned...”

Quiet paused, looking down at his hands clasped in his lap. “I got to be a person, for a little while,” he whispered so quietly he must not have meant for anyone to hear. But Tabitha did.

And was struck with two realizations simultaneously. One, this boy— this man —had also been there with her, while they waited side-by-side with shackles around their necks.

The other was that she never really thought about it, how the ‘game’ they had been playing was *his entire life*. How would that *feel*?

“Paco has you covered,” Connie said, nodding over to the man in question. He tensed, glancing at Tabi and the new arrivals. Something about the way his eyes were darting around the room had Tabi doing a mental head-count.

“Right,” he exhaled as his answer. “I can cook something for *you*. Anytime. Anything.”

“He’s only getting better, too!” Connie added, apparently working double-time to lighten the mood, his smile a little bigger on his face than Tabi thought it had the right to be.

Quiet smiled a little, anyway, in return. “I definitely prefer your cooking to his, Paco. It was just...”

“You never had anything to eat before.” Ave said, tinged with the same nostalgia. Probably thinking back to his own first meal.

“The absolute picture of a life. That one, singular moment... it was perfect,” Quiet laughed, bitter and cold as he continued, “and then I had it again, and again, and again... and it just kept getting worse. I was so *tired*. And she was, too. We all were.”

“Of course you were,” Cain agreed without inflection. “It’s everything I warned you about.”

“Fuck off,” Ciro snapped, a lot less loud than Tabi had started to expect of him.

Quiet sighed into his hand, muttering, as Tabi imagined an old polaroid fading with time, once-beautiful colors going grey and dull with age. “It was the worst meal I ever had.”

‘His first experience at being something like a person,’ ruined. The very thought ached.

“It wasn’t that I was tired of the experience. It wasn’t me that changed; it wasn’t her, either. It wasn’t even Felipe or Him. The food was just—worse, impossibly. It kept changing. No matter how much I tried to remember how good it was the first time, to stay in that moment, the peace would never last. The peace was *supposed* to last. We wanted to be happy, but the changes wouldn’t let us—it kept degrading, the changes were trending down and the decline was getting sharper. We couldn’t be happy like that. But we wanted to be. We *had* to be, he gave us no other options.

“I wasn’t allowed *not* to finish dinner. That’s not how the picture played out, that’s not how the story went. I wasn’t what was supposed to happen. So I cleared my plate, each and every

time. And he refilled it, each and every time. Patiently watching me from across the table, staring down at me, waiting for me to finish so he could serve me. No matter how tired I was, no matter how little it all tasted of anything, no matter how much I *hated* the taste or the textures or the sensation of food shoved in my mouth and passing down my throat or— or shadows on my wrists or—” Quiet broke off, there. “I had to finish. I had to, I had to.”

Ave choked, a little. “Wait. Here, what you gave me. Were you...?”

“You need it more than me,” Quiet smiled.

“That doesn’t reassure me.” Ave said. Tabi had the feeling it wasn’t quite meant to.

“Is that how you found out you didn’t like vegetables?”

In any other situation, Tabi would have laughed to herself. What was he, a child?...

“There was a goblet I just couldn’t drink,” he then pointed at Oleander, palm up, as if saying ‘stop’, “It was *disgusting*, Oli, spare me the words. You seemed to really like it, though, more than the food... she did too, now that I think back on it...”

Oli blinked. “I was there?”

Quiet took a breath. “Didn’t I say that? Yes, you were very happy doing stuff with ‘*our beautiful queenly wife*, ’” and Tabi had known he would mimic again at some point, she’d known it!

“Well,” Oli started, drawing out the word as he glanced over to Tabi’s sister and looked her over. “She *is* very pretty.”

“Obviously,” Ava agreed.

Dami reached towards Winnie with her non-sister-occupied arm, clenching and releasing her fist in a grabby-hands motion when she couldn’t quite reach and waited for Winnie to take her hand. “You hurt my friend,” Dami shrugged back at Oli. “So you might have to work on that first. Thank you Ava.”

Said Ava cheered in response.

Tabi was busy thinking about other things. Like ‘Voice of the Opportunist,’ of all voices, the backstabber, being the one to come in at this stage. Yet another one who she wouldn’t let get close to her sister in either form.

“You didn’t say that,” Skeptic— no, ‘*Harri?*, ’ was that his new name? —said, opening a notebook and clicking a pen. “So Oli hatched after Felipe killed you? Why him?”

“It... depends on what we were doing before.”

“Obviously. That’s how it’s always worked. But nothing you said happened before rings clearly as *Oleander* to me... no offense.”

“None taken, Detective!”

“I think it was something about changing my mind last minute..? Or maybe he was that eager to be part of things. He wasn’t the only one who could hatch there, though.”

“Who else?”

“You,” Quiet said, bluntly, and then winced. “Or... Paco. You two were... close.”

“I can’t be the one to hatch there, I’m married.”

Tabi froze, heart skipping a beat. What? What? *What?* “You are?”

“Not yet. Wink,” he said, verbally, as he winked. Quiet snickered very quietly. Tabi could almost predict what that glint in Dami’s eyes meant: talks about a ‘white wedding’. She didn’t see the appeal of that. She decided to shelve it for later discussion.

“Well... eventually, she said she was tired of eating and... one of the four torches of the room went out.”

Harri and Paco straightened in unison. “That’s the key!”

“If all the torches go out, there won’t be any shadows left to hold us—” Paco started.

“—Just darkness without a shape!” Harri finished, his keyhole-shaped pupils almost overtaking the irises. Tabi could see the thirst being filled by the well of knowledge.

“You two are forgetting he could hurt either of them!” Nando jumped into whatever thought transmission those two were having. Quiet looked on, gaze softening, impossibly fond. He turned to him. “Did we help at all?”

“Oh, yes,” Quiet’s tone was a bit more upbeat. “You were *amazing*. With Harri, you two kept trying to figure out what was going on, planning how to get us out while I tried to keep him appeased.”

Harri smiled. “Of course, that’s what I do.”

“And Nando helped me too, trying to keep her calm.”

“Would he have hurt you, if she was unhappy?” Ave asked, tilting his head.

Quiet had finally run out of words to say. Or formulating an answer was more complicated than a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. That had to be it, because the silence would be its own answer otherwise and Tabi did not want to hear it, but how do you not hear silence if nobody is speaking? How do you prevent the mind from coming up with worst-case scenarios? If he had been hurt, in what way, how to prevent it, how to make it not happen this time, how to keep people safe?

And then she understood. Paranoid. Of course. The one who had come into existence, ‘hatched’, as they called it, from a decisive threat to their life. A threat, and a helplessness,

those seemed to be the two factors that tied both the ‘routes’ together. The common thread between a Nightmare and a ‘Happy Ending’.

Long claws the size of Dami’s head, the knowledge that ranged attacks didn’t work, Quiet readily admitting how Felipe held him down, and the description of when dinner went bad... Quiet was not Felipe’s ‘main priority,’ allegedly. If he believed that one of the pairing posed a threat to the other, whose side would he choose? How far would he go to defend her?

What would make him *stop*?

“She took a lot of care to not appear so,” Quiet said, breaking the silence at last, yet the sound of it still rang in Tabi’s ears. “Like I said, he only grabbed her twice. She— sorry, you,” Quiet turned to Dami. “You sounded... scared. We *were* afraid for you, even Paco.”

“I didn’t ask about her,” Ave interrupted. “You, first.”

“That’s not what’s important here,” Tabi said. She had her answers: no matter his intentions, Felipe was very much a threat to her sister. Considering the blackout mere moments before they escaped the house, likely an *active* threat.

Except, the wide-eyed-with-rage stare she was the target of didn’t agree. A shiver ran through her frame, the only sign of fear she permitted herself. The only sign they couldn’t see. Even if she was starting to question the veracity of that claim. Even if, despite the darkness of the room and her distance from him, she could see how Ave’s pupils contracted into unmoving, focused slits.

“Neither of them were going to be okay in that cabin,” Nando said. “Staying there was a mistake. Felipe... had signs of instability from the start.”

“What are you getting at?” Winnie asked.

“Hard to believe you wouldn’t have said something if that was the case,” Grace commented.

Tabi felt something diffuse. Ave blinked, his eyes returning to normal, no longer so sharply visible in the low light of the room. She had to agree with Nando; she’d seen as much in Dami’s run of things. Why weren’t they seeing that?

“Girls, girls, I know you’re smart,” Tabi said, raising an eyebrow when they only stared at her. “‘I will end our life without a second thought’ ringing any bells, by chance?”

Dami shuddered. Tabi felt a little bad for bringing it up so suddenly.

“What?” Nando turned to Tabi, open-mouthed for a second. “Where—?”

“Yeah, what?” Ciro said. “He can’t just *do things* like that, he’s not... But he did it, didn’t he? Shit...”

“He followed through, too,” Quiet said in the silence left behind. It was a confession to the open air, not meant for either present or living ears. Possibly not even meant for himself.

Still, he smiled as if he just told a joke. “I don’t know why you named me ‘Decider’, you could do things just fine.”

“It’s your most interesting quality,” Cain said at once, as though the answer were self-evident.

“Oh, he has a lot better than that,” Paco responded just as automatically.

“That’s not right, though,” Nando interrupted the two before they could start squabbling. “That was your name. It mattered. We shouldn’t have been able to take that from you, let alone to hurt ourself.”

“Ourselves,” Cain corrected. “There’s no ‘ourself’ anymore.”

“Still a collective. Just a little more separate,” Grace commented.

“I shouldn’t have said that... Can I just keep going?” Quiet hurried to say, clearly not wanting to delve into the topic. “Felipe got angry every time one of the torches went out. Got angrier each time. He didn’t hurt her, but she was still scared. Defensive, avoidant. Hyperventilating, once. That’s... not fun to experience. I would’ve helped if I could.”

“I know,” was all Dami said.

“You had the idea of playing a game, so that’s what we did. Oli cheated, by the way.”

“Why was that necessary to mention?” Oli blurted out.

“You kept saying you were great at games!” Quiet said as if that was an actual answer. “When it got boring, and it did get boring eventually, we kept making up new rules. He kept making it more complicated. We tried to find more things to do, until we ran out of ideas.”

“And then?”

“He relayed what he wanted to tell me through you. ‘Isn’t this enough? Isn’t this what you wanted him to do?’ He said he was tired.”

Paco straightened. “That’s manipulative. Why was he trying to manipulate you?”

“After all he did, he played that card?” Winnie sneered.

“Maybe he was being genuine.” Dami offered.

“Does his intent even matter after what he did?” Harri asked.

“The point *is* , we were able to get out eventually. All the torches went out.” Quiet sighed. “Smitten faded away too. Even the Narrator thought you deserved to get out, after all you went through.”

There was a lot of information Tabi both could get from what was said and more stuff she wanted to know. The shadow had ‘faded away’, been killed or had it returned to Quiet’s head? How did the torches go out? Since when could the Narrator change his mind?

Dami covered her mouth with her hands. “What do you mean by that?”

“He... let you go,” Quiet finished.

“Where did *he* go?” Dami asked.

Quiet stiffened. Something passed over, through, his expression. Something Tabi couldn’t place or name, but something strong. Something with weight, slumping his shoulders, that pulled him down and had Tabi’s heart sinking with him.

“All that,” Paco drawled, his tone tired, “and you still haven’t answered the question of how you knew how to find us.”

“*I wish I knew,*” Quiet breathed. It wasn’t something he said. And it was not a response to Paco’s question. But the conversation moved on like he wasn’t breathing at all. There were more important things to talk about.

“I think...” Tabi closed her eyes, recalling the memory of the rain. “It had something to do with our power leaks. I didn’t know where I was going, but between the rain and the need for somewhere quiet to think, I was drawn here.”

“*Led* here?” Paco asked.

“No. If I was ever being influenced, if something unseen was chaining me up from afar, pulling me along a path it set for me, it was by something in that house,” Tabi assured him to the best of her ability. “Leaving it behind unlocked something buried. By all means, I should’ve left sooner. There are some psychopaths in those walls.”

“Exactly!” Paco shouted, nodding enthusiastically. “Absolute madness between them!”

“Glad to have you here, instead. Two minds are better than one,” Harri said, softly. *What a nice name.* He smiled. “And I could use your help puzzling a few things out.”

The others were talking, he knew that, but he couldn’t understand the words. Blood was rushing in his ears. He couldn’t look at Quiet in the eye.

Not with the knowledge he had failed. Worse, he had prompted another horrible sequence of events by his own suggestion. *Again.* Worse, that time, because he’d hurt *two* people who didn’t deserve it at the same time, and he couldn’t even remember it well enough to apologize. Worse, because he couldn’t even say he didn’t know well enough to know better; why, ever, would *Dami* of all Princesses need to be locked away?

Worse, because the hurt had come from another of his Voices and he hadn’t been able to stop it, hadn’t even been able to try. When Broken had betrayed them, he had at least been able to *do* something.

And Quiet didn’t even think he was at fault. Quiet had said he was *proud* of him. Somehow, that made it worse.

If anything, he was worrying about *him*, like he had managed to peek at what Nando was feeling through the threads. Maybe, he'd say it wasn't his fault.

Quiet could lie to him and he'd believe it,

because Nando couldn't believe he'd lie

or

because he wanted to believe it was true

or

because he didn't know how else to survive.

He was the second in command. He was the First. He was supposed to protect him, and yet each scar was a monument of his failures. All his fault. Not smart enough, not strong enough, not fast enough. Just enough to *watch* Quiet struggle, and occasionally suggest something that makes him suffer worse than anything Nando could've imagined.

Why did he ever speak *at all*? He wasn't the Decider; he was supposed to be there for the others, not to tell Quiet what to do. He slowly tuned back into the others' discussions, a silent promise made to himself that he would keep his mouth shut before he thoughtlessly hurt someone important again. Twice was bad enough. A third time and there'd be nothing worthwhile left of him to forgive.

"This is all well and good but *somebody* still owes me money," Connie was saying slowly, gleefully, while trying to move his chair so it wouldn't bump into anything.

"I do not!" Ciro answered at once.

"I didn't mean you but thank you for reminding me!"

That, at the very least, was enough to distract Quiet, enough to keep him from asking about Nando just yet.

"You've been betting?" Quiet frowned, almost managing to sound utterly stern and disapproving.

"It's not 'betting', buddy, it's 'strategic speculation,'" Oleander didn't let two seconds pass before saying that ridiculous line. "But nevermind that, we were about to show you something we all have been working on."

"All of you. In a room, together, willingly. And nothing caught on fire?"

"Not yet," an understandably wary Paco answered. "We were just starting to brainstorm."

Tabi perked up at the same time Ava slumped, bored already. At least the reminder of what they had been doing before gave him the will to focus on something else, for the moment. Allowing his blood to boil and his mind to wander other paths. Harri jumped up and

presented the whiteboard to Quiet, without flourish but with some amount of expectant haste, popping the cap off a marker and quickly underlining, in bold titular letters, '*HOW TO KILL GOD*' as though it were not prominent enough on its own and needed more proper indication.

Quiet *stared*.

"Oho?" Tabi said at once, joining Harri beside the board and reading the scribblings below with narrowed eyes.

"Nevermind, I'm in!" Ava grinned. Gonchi patted her—well, *slapped* her—on the back.

Dami shrunk back, glancing around the room at everyone's reactions and locking eyes with Nando. He hoped his smile was encouraging. She didn't smile back, just darted her eyes away and quietly took a seat near the back of the room, smoothing the fabric of her dress over repeatedly.

"This I can get behind," Winnie admitted, taking a seat near Dami.

Quiet hadn't spoken yet, hadn't taken his eyes away from the whiteboard. Only shuffled closer to Nando, barely, unsurely. Nando brushed his hand over his thread, very gently.

There was no sense of safety, there was no peace of mind. There was only fear, fear, *fear*.

"Can..." Quiet stuttered. "Can I just ask what I did?"

"It's not for *you*, Quiet!" Ciro cried, affronted, as Paco and Ave shook their heads rapidly.

Winnie scoffed, rolling her eyes. "You're not a god."

"Promise?"

And that made Nando look at him closer. There was something so terribly vulnerable in his posture, so tense yet so unwilling to make a move. An unguarded war between hurt and hope in his expression, he glanced between Ciro and Winnie as if expecting them to break out into laughter at the naivety of his hope and pounce on him to capitalize on his hurt—yet so desperately hoping they wouldn't. Leaning backwards in defense but arms stretched forward seeking support, stuck between two states and unable to commit to either. Not until he had an answer.

So terribly awkward in such a small, frail body. So terribly uncertain. So terribly mortal and human and aching *real*.

"Of course," Nando promised, because how could he not? "Never will be. Us is plenty."

Like the words were a spell, the fear bled out of him. He seemed to sink, stepping off from the back foot and leaning just a little towards Nando, like he wasn't sure how to stand on his own. It made his heart ache, the amount of trust Quiet put on him. But he wasn't scared anymore. That, he could do.

"I don't get it, Nando. You were always against killing and now you're thinking with the others how to kill Her and –" he cut off. He must have noticed something. "And you look proud of that."

There was no anger in that tone, just vague curiosity.

"Later," Nando promised, because there was no time to explain how even the notion of Quiet being hurt again made his heart bleed. The dream, even *moreso*.

"Okay," Tabi said, pointing to a random section on the board. "It says here 'stab her in the heart'. Small question: Does that include *us*? Since it's definitely using us as its hearts."

"Just the important one," Cain said.

"How do we *find* the 'important one,' if there's even such a distinction? Last I checked, hands don't *have* hearts."

"Thinking about it is against the point."

"No, chilly," Grace drawled, floating across the room and circling Quiet. She brushed her hand over Nando's shoulder as she passed him, too. That was weird. And nice. And cold. "I think it's customary *to* think a little about the person you're murdering."

"I never know if I should apologize when you say stuff like that," Quiet breathed out.

"Oh, killer," Grace sighed. "Don't worry, you *did* think about me. Just a little out of order, is all."

"Hello, last I checked we had someone who had seen her heart!" Gonchi, of all people, reminded them. Ah, so that was how it felt to be the center of attention. Nando couldn't say he liked the feeling.

"We are talking about a god, who knows if the heart is the important part." Harri sighed. Which could have been a valid point, except that Nando knew. Quiet knew.

"How about the eye?" Connie suggested. "Everyone's vulnerable in their eyes, they're the squishiest part!"

Quiet crinkled. Not unlike a crushed tin can, but *moreso* like a tissue paper. A gentle wheeze, brief, escaped him before being cut off by a silence. A silence intermingled with the brief interruptions of gasps and hiccups, a sort of croaking noise comparable to the gentle cracking of kindling in a domestic fire. His body trembled only slightly as he curled in on himself, just a bit, in that special silence. A silence of interrupted breath, each exhale punctuated by another vocal trim, embers escaping the blaze and flying across the room.

Embers that flew directly to and through Nando's very soul. Because Quiet, despite everything, was *laughing*, and the silence of it might've become his favorite sound. Because the fire was warm, and gentle, and glowing so brightly Nando couldn't help but stare directly into it, mesmerized by the light and its flickering in the silence. The light shimmering in his wet eyes and traveling in tracks down his face.

Quiet was also *crying*, but that was alright. He just needed air. Nando patted him on the back against the echoed warmth in his own chest, built up and compelling him to laugh under his breath just a bit—not at Connie’s comment, but at the utter state Quiet had been put into as a result of it.

Quiet, very weakly, reached out from the ball he’d curled into and patted Nando’s arm back.

Connie was looking pretty proud of himself. “See, I have good ideas sometimes! We just have to go for the eyes, how difficult can it be?”

“Did you forget already what Quiet told us? She’s infinite, meaning, her number of eyes would be infinity multiplied by two!”

“Yikes,” Oli cringed. “Sounds like a lot of effort. I dunno, personally I’d prefer something like a back—oooh, or a *shin*! Real easy to kick with minimal risk to ourselves. She *does* have legs, right boss?”

Quiet recovered enough to straighten out... for the most part. He opened his mouth to answer and out came a garbled mess somewhere between a “yeah” and a “maybe,” then, “I— I don’t know? She’s too big for that to work even if She had them.”

“Shin kicking is for babies!” Connie was a bit too enamoured with his own idea. “If we want to deal actual damage, the eye’s where’s at! We just need her good one!”

“What do you mean, ‘good one?’” Tabi asked.

Ciro turned around in his seat to glare at Connie suspiciously, but shook his head instead of saying anything immediately.

“Everyone has a good eye, just ask Harri,” Connie said, pointing to the man in question.

Harri stared at him for a moment. “Both my eyes are bad. That’s the entire point of wearing glasses.”

Connie paused in his answer. “...what? Isn’t one better than the other? I thought it worked like that!”

Harri, apparently, did not deem Connie worthy of an answer. He removed his glasses and squinted at him for a long, long moment, then turned his head to focus on an arbitrary spot on the far wall, instead. His expression kept twitching.

“...Yeah?” Connie prompted after a minute.

Harri immediately shushed him. “I’m checking, hold on. I need to focus.”

“We can do eye exams later,” Ciro interrupted, standing from his seat and grabbing a marker directly from Harri’s hand. “What else?”

“Does the construct have a window?” Connie asked.

“We technically left through the door,” Nando frowned, “It *was* an exit. Or, the representation of an exit. A window of opportunity, you could say.”

Connie blinked. “Okay but is it a metaphor or a thing? You know I hate it when things get all metaphysical. Hard to have a goof when you’re being metaphysical.”

“Are you taking this seriously at all?” Ciro snapped. “No, okay, an idea from *anyone other than Connie*.”

“Besides, we wouldn’t even have a blade to throw,” Nando couldn’t help himself.

Quiet gasped at his side, eyes wide. It wasn’t really the noise he was expecting as a reaction, but it caught his attention regardless.

Quiet twisted his body around to kneel on his chair backwards, hands on the backboard as he sought out Dami. “Her alternate self still had the blade around her neck. Even when the thing in the dark had her, the hands never let me see the blade, they always covered it.”

“So we would have a blade after all. Good.” Ciro said.

“Her whole thing is perception, right?” Tabi asked. “We can do whatever we think we can. Have we considered just wishing her gone?”

“Wouldn’t work, I tried.” Quiet answered.

“Do you work like the rest of us, though?” Harri asked. Quiet shrugged and made a so-so gesture with his hand. “We could be different, then. Not to mention the *other* guests here.”

“What if we *all* wished her gone?” Connie added. “And held hands in a circle while doing it!”

“I recognize that reference, if you saw the finale without us I will hunt you down,” Ciro said.

“Too risky.” Winnie opined.

“Seriously? She’s a god, gods need belief and the only ones who believe in her existence are in this room, most of them,” Nando ranted. *Granted, she’s the only one who actually believes in herself, but with the attitude she has, maybe self-absorption alone is enough to sustain such a vapid existence in a vacuum.*

“What’s a god to a nonbeliever?” Connie finished for him.

Quiet whipped around to stare at Nando. Somehow, the expression on his face was more overwhelming than the attention of everyone in the room at once. He coughed.

“It wouldn’t be the first god you defeated that way.”

What?

“I’ll tell you later,” Quiet smiled. That sneaky little—

“Oli, talking is your thing, right?” Grace chimed in. “So *you* could go up to her—”

“I like that plan,” Cain commented. “I wonder what he’d come up with to say to someone who would never compromise with him.”

Oli gulped. That shade of white couldn’t be healthy. “Nnnnnno, I’d rather not. I’m more of a ‘background management’ kinda guy... the limelight’s not for me, you know...”

“Agreed on that one, you suck even at your description,” Winnie said.

“Yeah, no, he’d die.” Quiet said, bluntly. “She’s not big on talking. And the things She does say, She doesn’t want to really argue.”

“Can we give her Cain, instead?” Paco offered.

Paco’s idea of self-preservation hit a lot different when they were all in different bodies. He had been a godsend (heh) when dealing with the Nightmare, but outside of the cabin...

He was exhausting. Actively refusing help in dealing with things — not only from Fernando himself, as he had thought, but from *everyone*. They had to delegate the cooking to him, otherwise he would refuse to eat at all. Physically unable to stop himself from pointing out when others made mistakes, always having to have the last word, oh, how much they had clashed at the beginning...

If there was something he just couldn’t describe Paco as, it would be ‘kind’. ‘Good,’ yes, but not ‘kind’. Lately, he had been trying to be, if not ‘kind,’ then at least ‘considerate.’ He hadn’t been at the beginning, too ready to save himself and ditch the others.

It was a minor miracle that he, Ciro and Ave got along well.

“Sure,” Cain said, just as Quiet gave a very loud, very inquisitive “NO” in response. “I don’t see why not.”

Ciro, apparently taking a side in the debate, wrote “sacrifice Cain” on the whiteboard.

Ciro had more than earned Fernando’s respect when dealing with the Razor. By virtue of stepping up, he had done what Nando himself could not, in what he remembered nor in the game: getting the others to work together. Foul mouthed he might have been, but did that truly count as a flaw in the situation they had been hatched into?

Outside of the cabin, however... he had taken a *while* to adapt. At first, much like Paco, to touch him was to get hit. With all his strength. To catch him unaware was to tempt fate. Afraid. Caught in that deadly dance, still. Seeing tricks and traps in every situation, preparing for all the things he couldn’t see coming. And to push him, to ask from him something new or criticize his abrasiveness or his sharp edges, was to unleash hell upon yourself.

Despite everything, the temper in Ciro now was much, much tamer than the temper of Ciro *then*. So, so very angry and scared. Unwilling to believe it was finally over, unable to remember how it could’ve possibly ended.

“We are *not* offering parts of the group up to *die*, ” Quiet stressed.

“I wouldn’t,” Cain said.

“See? He’s up for it!” Paco pointed to him. He sat with crossed legs and folded arms, casual yet unmoving and still in his seat.

“No,” Quiet said, unamused.

Cain didn’t seem upset by getting shot down. He didn’t seem to react at all. Sometimes, Nando really had to wonder what was up with him. He hadn’t done much of anything when Nando first met him, and he expected to get to know him a little better in all the time since. And yet, beyond him silently sitting in on Nando’s conversations with the others and taking the occasional opportunity to be an ass, Cain was still practically a stranger to him. Him trying to “help” Quiet like he learned he could do from that game was at least a *new* development, even if it wasn’t one Nando was particularly fond of.

Maybe he just didn’t like to talk. Or only talked when he had something to say. He was much more talkative in the cabin... maybe the body swap was harder on him than the rest. He certainly hadn’t controlled himself with nearly the grace he did now, in the beginning.

Even moving had been hard for them, at first. So he had to give him some credit. Even if he’d been the last of them to learn how to stand, the last to speak without use of the threads to do his talking for him, one of the last to pick a name for himself... he’d managed. And when he managed, he managed *fast* . As if unlocking the door gave him access to everything behind it all at once.

Very unlike Ave. In fact, a polar opposite.

Nando remembered waking up on a path in the woods and hearing Cain’s self-assured voice in their shared head and feeling a disconcerted *certainty* somewhere within them. Nando remembered waking up in another path in the woods and Ave’s voice inspiring something *insecure*, feeling out the texture of the path on their feet to ascertain the safety of the ground.

Ave had been one of the only ones to want to hide from the get-go. Unlike Cain, who considered himself something special, Ave tucked himself away in their shared consciousness like he wasn’t meant to exist at all; a voice not meant to speak, only feel and be in any other way than this. And yet he spoke words in foundations of a chill down their spine and a tickle on their arms and the subtle scent of death in the cabin’s wood—a complete and utter understanding of their body and its senses and its vulnerabilities from the first moment of his awareness.

Was it really a surprise he took to having a body of his own the fastest? And was it a surprise when his first instinct, still, was to hide? Was to flee when he was found, and hiss and spit and scratch when he was pursued?

Was it really a surprise Cain had chosen both him and Ciro to poke and prod out of all of them, at first?

It *had* been a surprise, when Ave started biting. A pleasant one, if just for the fact that it was nice to see Ave standing up for himself; normally, the person bitten would disagree, but Cain seemed utterly unaffected. Both times. If anything, a little impressed. Nando had first-hand experience with how waiting to retaliate against something threatening you had bad, bad, bad consequences—how his not being fast or smart or strong enough haunted him, still. But he was getting better. Ave, too. He just hoped Ave would remember to wash his mouth each time he decided to go on the offensive, if his preferred maneuver became his signature. And that Harri patched Cain up each time, too.

Someone's stomach growled. Loudly.

"Sorry," Ava grinned, almost sheepishly. "Can't think when I'm hungry."

Paco grit his teeth with such force Nando almost heard it. Ave winced, probably for the same reason. "We have to go grocery shopping tomorrow, there's not enough for the usual suspects and there is no way I am cooking something for this many people this late."

"That's fine," Oli waved him off, standing up from his chair, "It's late and we have to be sharp for this. I was thinking takeout. Empanadas from Bocatto? Donuts on the side? Besides, *someone* didn't have lunch, don't think I didn't notice."

"No, pizza from Pan-Z is our best bet," Gonchi said. "Just say it's Gonzalo Puñales' house and they'll be here in less than half an hour, the owner knows me."

"Good point," Oli was already walking to the door, some of the others following leisurely, "But if you say there's a party at Dr. Oleander Hermes' house we're getting discounts on the empanadas. I know my stuff."

Harri blinked, "There's," he counted under his breath, "a lot of people here, the discount better be worth it!"

"The menu's on the fridge."

As it turned out, fifteen people meant a lot of empanadas. With variety. Some with sweet fillings for dessert, even. Nando wasn't keeping count, but with the way Oli's face was transforming the more they added, he supposed it would make a dent in his finances.

"Ghosts can't even eat!"

"That's ridiculous, yes I can."

"Who would eat a chicken and mushroom empanada? That's an abomination to cooking everywhere."

"Bite me, Gonchi. Wait, wait, you actually might..."

Nando himself had stopped counting at 34. And tuned out the others when Winnie and Connie got a bit too into defending their unconventional choices of filling. And managed to catch Gonchi and Quiet sneaking away.

And he went, too.

Something bad about remembering things that never were was that they blurred together. His flock, his Voices liked him now, yes, but he could half-remember a time where it wasn't so. Very much not so.

So, he had been half-afraid of that happening again, after his frankly embarrassing breakdown. He must've been so obnoxious, talking way more than he had planned to in that split second choice.

That wasn't what happened. He was prepared for it *to* happen, staring at that whiteboard—ready to be a god, a tormented god, the last and only god of the new world, if his Voices could at least enjoy it without bloodshed beyond what they gave and he took in. No need. There was a certain change in how they treated him, yes. He could see it in their eyes, could sense the (*purpose*) in their threads humming through to the depths of his soul, could hear it in their carefully chosen tones of voice. They were... watching him, maybe. But Quiet didn't have the energy to analyze it yet. Mental exhaustion, apparently, took a while to recover from.

Which was why Gonchi offering to help him relax was such a strange request. Stubborn didn't help others, last he checked. He was always trying to get better and that was it. Then he realized how hypocritical it was for him to think his Voices couldn't change and develop. He knew they did. That was why he was so proud of them.

"I didn't have a chance with all that happened earlier," Gonchi started, conversationally, "but I'm proud of you too."

Quiet was ashamed to admit he had almost forgotten about that. It would have been mortifying to know he had accidentally broadcasted that to all his Voices if it wasn't true. He wondered, distantly, if the ones not present had heard it too. If he still meant it, even so far away. He thought he did.

Instead he asked, "Why?" Was this for getting Ava's favored outcome? "I just did as you wanted." Was this for getting all the others out? "I took too long."

"And here you are." Gonchi flashed him a grin with too-sharp teeth, bright and earnest, and he supposed that was his answer. Proud of him because he was here. He sure was.

There was no change in his expression when Quiet took off his shirt, no disdain for the overlapping scars. Quiet appreciated that so much.

So, so much.

As it turned out, having hands purposefully rubbing against the contractures and lumps on his back hurt. Not nearly as much as he had been afraid of, and Gonchi stopped whenever Quiet was afraid it'd be too much.

“I didn’t think you even knew the meaning of ‘gentle,’” Quiet commented, staring at the floor as he felt Gonchi pushing on a particularly stubborn spot just below his right shoulder blade. A building pressure without pain or even the lingering threat of it; what a novelty. The knot released and the pressure was pushed through his muscle fibers, Gonchi chasing after it with a lighter touch down his back. Gently, yet intentionally, stamping it out wherever it festered.

“What would be the point of going harder if I didn’t know when to slow down?” Gonchi said as he trailed near Quiet’s ribs at his sides. He tensed, just a bit, but it was fine. It was fine. Gonchi wasn’t going to, *wouldn’t* do more than surface work. Gonchi left the area alone, anyway. It was fine. “Plus, come on, who was in charge of keeping the body in top shape?”

“Paco.”

“You know what I mean.”

There was something strange, though. Something shifting, something reknitting. It felt like...

“What are you doing? I thought you liked scars.”

“You don’t like them,” Gonchi said, like trying to make Quiet’s scars fade was the most natural thing in the world. “You could’ve told me when we first got here, you know? I would’ve helped you.”

He had been afraid that Gonzalo would’ve thought him weak, for wanting to remove them. Or maybe for having so many at all. So many it was hard, if not impossible, to even *see* it all. So many that Quiet honestly couldn’t wholly remember where each was from; sometimes he found a new scar on his body and couldn’t recall a single place he could’ve gotten it. Sometimes he saw that same scar and recalled in vivid detail, so vivid it was like it was happening all over again, so vivid he couldn’t stop recalling it if he tried, the exact place he’d gotten it and how. Sometimes he never remembered. Sometimes he forgot to remember at all, and rediscovered it all over again. So many scars, and the mind had its limits. He knew it better than most.

“I could kill Her for you.”

Quiet startled, looked back. Gonchi’s eyes were dark, dark, dark. He was pulling his lips back from his teeth. Quiet got the feeling he was welcome to consider it a smile, if he wanted.

Why was he offering? Did he want to kill a god that badly? Should he tell her about the Tower and her branches, to dissuade him from such a task?

As Gonchi’s hands became more forceful, Quiet, paradoxically, started to relax. He didn’t know why. Maybe it was the massage. It did feel good. Maybe it was how he knew Gonchi had always helped him to the best of his ability, never forced him to do anything, booing aside. He’d helped him, then, and he’d been operating on dream-logic.

But it felt like Gonchi’s hands dipped beneath his skin, into his flesh. His muscles spasmed and for a moment he was—

“You okay there?”

—still under the same hands.

Yes. No. Maybe. He didn’t know. He didn’t know what was happening. It felt like there was digging around inside his back, and it felt good rather than bad, but also weird and getting weirder. Like being reknit, like unspooling, except... He wasn’t sure it was unspooling anymore. It was more like something getting created.

A sensation in— Quiet didn’t know. He thought, for a moment, questioning— maybe it was a phantom sensation. A phantom of what, he didn’t know. Phantom sensations weren’t familiar. Not like this. Not in— he keeps wanting to call it a limb, something. Usually, if he lost a limb, he was quick to die after; he never had to worry much about amputations. Another spasm in the muscles of limbs he couldn’t fathom— it felt like stretching, not like being opened, not like being pulled out of shape, but a shape meant for him that he’d forgotten being returned. Felt like growing. Felt like... something.

There was something there. Something that hadn’t been there just a few minutes ago. With every touch, they grew larger and larger. Nothing restrained them. Nothing tried to shape them. Nothing became them.

“Beautiful.”

Were they limbs? Something else? Quiet couldn’t turn his head to look. But as the things got bigger and bigger, he found that he didn’t have to.

Wings. His wings. Black wings, with long, fluffy feathers. Tiny silvery flecks among the black winked at him as the wings themselves twitched and grew.

The muscles in his back strained against the weight, and Quiet felt weak enough that he wasn’t sure he’d be able to sit up straight on his own. Even his eyes were starting to have a hard time focusing, illusory stars twinkling in his vision. The cosmos, *his* cosmos, formed before his very eyes— the very essence of the universe safely kept and concealed by those feathers, *his* feathers, healthy and pristine. He’d never seen them so pristine. Silky and smooth and glistening in the moonlight.

He, experimentally, tentatively, followed the trail of not-so-phantom-anymore sensations and tried to will his wings to stretch. The sound of cracking glass followed as uncountable joints snapped, crackled, and *popped* — pain lit up across those nerves he never-always had, each receptor alive and communicating, and a *wave* of feeling trailed through those limbs into his spine into his nerves into his brain into him and he *breathed* . A massive weight lifted from him, restraints unknown, bound and confined no longer, and he *stretched* . Deep, deep, deep breath. Life, unrestrained, flowed through him and he knew the meaning of his name and he was *here*.

It was beyond description, the peak of that stretch. Simply put: he was himself. Open and whole and himself. Like breathing air for the first time, just better in all inconceivable ways.

There weren't weights at his back anymore, no strain of his muscles to accommodate the new structures. They weren't new. They were always there. And now they weren't tense; they were mobile, light, flexible, and fully integrated with the rest of him like they should've been and always were from the first instant of his existence. What to do with them first?

He turned to Gonchi, using his wings as a counterbalance through the motion as though he'd done it all his life. He was crying. Quiet couldn't remember reciting any poetry, but the sound of his stretching wings sounded like music, so he supposed that was likely to count. He opened his arms and his wings followed and Gonchi, naturally, did not hesitate to ram himself directly into his chest at full force. (Quiet didn't think that was a masseuse technique. The massage was probably over, then.)

Quiet flapped his wings, air *whooshing* around him as he tried to weather the force of a much larger man slamming into him without forethought or forewarning. Gonchi was never one to do fore-anything. His feet, briefly, lifted off the ground and he was somewhat shocked to realize, no, Gonchi was *not* picking him up—he was doing that himself—he would've thought it would be harder to defy gravity?—before his feet reconnected with the floor and he stumbled forward, wings diving forward and wrapping around Gonchi as his limbs struggled for purchase to balance on.

Well. Good as any other unmovable surface to ground himself on, he supposed. He wondered if his feathers were as soft as they looked.

His other limbs had found some sort of purchase *around* Gonchi's torso. As good as any other hug he'd give, if just a little different. Nothing constricting him. Again, he hadn't expected Gonzalo to be so *gentle*.

He wanted to speak through the sudden tightness in his throat. He wanted to say 'thank you', because he finally felt like things might be okay someday.

Gonchi's threads hummed. He understood.

Chapter End Notes

overthink_it - Don't worry y'all. The next chapter's mostly fluff. (:

Chapter 15: Como pasa el tiempo

Chapter Summary

The night unwinds as it's spent in the safety of the nest. It is a domain of quiet and rest and not much at all. Notes are taken. Food is eaten. Words are exchanged.

Chapter Notes

Hiii everyone! Enjoy the chapter! Did you know that we have [a tvtropes page?](#) ? It needs some love desperately, so if you want to add tropes then go for it!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Quiet couldn't stop thinking about his wings.

It was something he was entitled to. Something he owned, something he was. He'd never been aware of them, but they were always there.

Before, his body was never quite true to him. Never connected to him, not fully. Something was always... **off. Wrong.** He gazed into the mirror as he covered his eyes, revolted at the sight of his own reflection even before that body started rotting. **Not** his own, **not** him. He knew it, sometimes, how **not** -himself his own body was. How the others took control of it better than he could. How She took it. Took it for Herself, against his will, controlled it and changed it and destroyed, reshaped, reformed it. Taken in too many ways to name. Possessed in more ways than one. He was **not** a body. Maybe others were theirs', but he was **not** his body. He was a puppet controlled by other things.

Never him.

But when he saw it from the outside...

He'd seen them, once. He'd seen them as his body stretched before him, as his voices used it without him, those wings that spread and posed and seemed to perfect his form. Those wings that moved like a living thing did. That made every movement feel real, feel true and genuine. The body did not look so strung up, then. The body looked like him. Spreading wings and trailing threads. Graceful, perfect, whole. It amazed him. He amazed himself. Coming back into that body, surrounded by his voices and slotting back into the space he used to occupy, felt like coming home. It felt like he was real, like this body was real.

He hated the Mirror. He could never see his wings in it.

But he could see them, back then, whenever he was disconnected—and each and every time, he wanted in that body he saw. And he could see it now. He could see them now. Wings, wings, he had wings!

It felt so good. It felt so impossibly right. He worked so hard to spread them, the first time. To break the bindings around them, to push and strain against his constraints and just be himself with neither cage nor label. He worked so hard. And— and— and now he could stretch them whenever he wanted. And see them!

He liked seeing them. Affirming he could see them. He wanted to find a mirror, quickly, so he could see them better. More angles!

The others' reactions were something he only barely had the briefest presence of mind to worry about before it was too late to worry and he'd presented himself to them.

The silence, the awe, that travelled through the room was something else. He'd been worried it was revulsion. It was not. He could see their lines of sight centering to the left or right of his back, trailing along the contours of their shapes, and he'd been filled with equal parts pride and anxiety by those stares. The weight of his kingdom baring witness to him. And they'd been amazed. And those continued, lingering stares felt amazing, incredible, fulfilling.

He knew they'd eventually get bashful or self-conscious about their staring, or even used to the sight, but he just wanted to linger in their awe for a while. He just wanted to bask in the moment.

“What the hell?” Ciro reacted first, and the moment changed. Quiet followed his line of sight away from his wings back to Gonchi. “Me next, asshole!”

Something like jealousy welled up in Quiet's throat, hard and bitter. He swallowed it, or at least tried to. *They can have this, too. These aren't just mine.*

For the first time Quiet knew him, Gonchi seemed at a loss of what to do. “I don't know if I can make you do *that*—”

“Well, fuck, at least fix me up like you did him!” Ciro pivoted. Something like— no, *genuine relief* filled Quiet. *Good. My wings, mine, they're mine.* He hesitated, then swallowed that, too. *What* was with him?

Then Harri started asking questions. And Cain, apparently, decided he wanted answers to those questions, and touched his wings. Quiet hadn't noticed his approach. It was far too late to react, to even think to draw back from him. He was running his hand down, through, his feathers. Fingers delicately parting them through the motion, smooth and light, smoothing them over. Equal parts revulsion and bliss ran through him and he choked. Cain did not immediately stop; the touch lingered, even as his hand stalled and he regarded Quiet. Far too much, far too much.

(Lightheaded) (Overwhelm) (Longing)

Cain, slowly, withdrew his hand.

Deep breath. It was a shaky thing. A contained shiver.

Harri opted for questions. Words were far easier than examinations. Even if it felt nice-bad, and Quiet wanted the nice so much he thought he could've endured the bad. Even if Quiet might've not actually been able to endure the bad and thought he was wholly okay with that.

“How does this **added weight** affect your balance?”

Quiet shifted in place, twisting his back muscles and stepping from side to side. They'd been with him all his life. **(He's never had them before.)** He answered honestly, “not at all.”

“You can move them just fine?”

Quiet nodded. He couldn't spread them to their full wingspan in this room, but he could do a short demonstration of a fraction of their mobility. He glanced across the room for their reactions and tried not to preen too hard at how intently each of them were watching. Connie shared a glance with Ave across the room.

A feminine voice made him jolt. Dami was staring too, eyes shining. “You're beautiful.”

Quiet nodded subtly, wings curling in to cover his face just a bit.

“Your feathers *do* look healthy,” Nando commented. “For, uh, the birds I've seen.”

“Yes,” Harri interrupted before Quiet could curl in further. “Your feathers: how do they grow in?”

Quiet paused. He... ***didn't know***.

“Lay off him, he *just got them back*,” Gonchi huffed. Quiet's wings lowered, wilting away from him.

Quiet didn't know the answers to Harri's questions. He didn't know how to clean his wings, or to preen them, or when new feathers might grow in and the old shed. Awareness trickled into Quiet of how **new** his wings were, and it made them feel less, made him feel **wrong**.

“Well, regardless,” Connie started. “Whenever your down feathers molt, we can collect them.”

Quiet blinked. Stalled. The weaving thread of inadequacy and **wrong** paused in its tapestry. *For what? Why?*

Harri paused for a second, contemplating, then turned to Cain. “How *do* his feathers feel? Their texture, I mean.”

“Interesting,” Cain said, not looking at Harri at all.

Quiet didn't know how to take that, but he took it anyway. It felt... it felt, well, something. The thread was pulled and unspooled. Quiet glanced back at his wings, beautiful and healthy and interesting. He felt okay.

“Who cares about how they feel?” Ava said, smiling, “Congrats! Do you have any idea the power they might be packing? You can knock someone down with one flap, that’s for sure.” By the tone of her voice, it was definitely meant as a compliment.

Quiet tried to imagine it, but logistics were never really the point with her. He lightly flapped his wings in acknowledgement. Connie gave an ‘ooh’ to the display as Ava and Gonchi cheered him on.

“Wings aren’t meant for fighting,” Ave chastised, which seemed ineffective on either Ava or Gonchi’s spirits. Connie, on the other hand, seemed to switch gears in his head. “They’re meant for—”

“—taking *flight!*” Ave and Connie said at once, Connie sitting up excitedly. “Can you—well, when you learn to fly, if you don’t know yet—can you take *us* flying?”

“You are all taller than me.”

“I bet I can make it work,” Connie said. “Either that, or you *have* to divebomb someone. Anyone! Even me, I’ll take it. It’s the *spirit* of the thing.”

Quiet contemplated this very, very seriously. With all the grave studiousness and rigor of his life experiences taken into account. He most certainly did not immediately start planning who, how, where, and when. Certainly not. He was taking it so seriously.

Ciro huffed. “Connie, stop corrupting him.”

Connie looked Quiet in the eye and unsubtly tilted his head over in Ciro’s direction. Quiet certainly did not nod. His head didn’t budge even a small inch. Nope. Nuh-uh.

And then the food came back, Oli with it, and he nearly dropped it when he stared at Quiet. *Awe*. Even if the door between them remained shut, Quiet *felt* it through his wide eyes and stopped breath, frozen in place and in shock.

Yes, Quiet decided. He liked it when they stared at him.

As it turned out, a change of air was just the thing she had been needing. No matter the events that had transpired in this place, the air was lighter here. Grace didn’t need to breathe anymore, but she could feel it. No tug in her chest, no urge to do something or other. She could just... be.

And make mistakes sometimes (her poor eyes!). This, though, wasn’t a mistake. And not only because she knocked first.

Tabi called an affirmative she could “come in!” on the other side of the door, but Dami opened it for her outright, gesturing her in with a small smile on her face. Grace floated in, spotting on a bed Tabi and Winnie sitting crosslegged with a Dami-sized gap between them. The former regarded her entrance with some bemusement, the latter with squinting eyes.

“You don’t normally think of knocking,” Tabi commented.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

She had to talk with the other girls. Make sure they were okay. She had to process, too, but that could be done later.

The bed was the first thing Grace spotted, Dami settling back into her spot on it, in that room. The room Quiet offered, volunteering to sleep in a certain someone else’s instead. The second thing Grace spotted was the *complete lack* of other things *to* spot. That room, it *had* to be brand new, someone *was* supposedly living here, but it felt no more alive than the basement she died in.

Maybe he didn’t really sleep in his room? Or spend time in it? Or... do anything, here, ever? He volunteered it easily, as if it were no more than a guest room. But guest rooms typically still had some resemblance of interior decorating, some amount of care put into their layout. There were typically *things* inside them, beyond the bare minimum for it to be called a bedroom: bed, bedside table... surely Dami had already commented on the lack of rug, or wall decorations, or *shelves*.

Right. She’d have to set Ava loose here sometime. She’d make this room look like a room.

She made her way over to the bedside table, the only other object of interest. On top was a single empty mug, likely from the kitchen. She felt inclined to speculate on its reasoning for being here. Maybe a midnight drink. The leftover sugar had crystalized. It was... sad. She went to open the cabinet—

“Snooping?” Winnie asked. Grace took her hand back, whirling around, a denial ready at the tip of her tongue as Winnie grinned. “No point, I already looked. He must’ve emptied out his things before inviting us in.”

“Couldn’t have, he didn’t have time,” Tabi said.

Dami nodded. “Makes sense. He’s not used to taking up space.”

Winnie whipped around to stare at her, as if she couldn’t believe what she had said.

“What?” Dami glanced towards the door. “He can’t hear me, can he?”

“No, but...” she shook her head. “Nevermind. Why are you here?”

“Can’t a girl join in on a sleepover without being interrogated?” Grace sighed, doing a short circle around the bed, careful not to brush too close against anyone. She learned early on in their co-habitation that these girls just weren’t warm enough to take her touches lightly. Even now, without even touching them, she could see the simple trail of mist she left in her wake making Tabi uncomfortable. Not to the fault of either of them. Some people just dealt with being haunted better than others. “How are we doing?”

“Isn’t that the question of the hour?” Tabi asked, taking Dami’s hand in her own to warm up. “How does a sleepover work for you, anyway?”

“We went over this with dinner, Tabi.” Grace shrugged, rolling her eyes playfully. “I can do anything you can do, plus a few extra tricks, *except* die.”

Tabi hummed skeptically. “Well, we’re doing about as well as can be expected. Thinking about getting Dami a night light.”

Dami gasped. “No! No—we are *not*! I’m not a child! We’re the same age!”

“This is petty revenge,” Winnie said, leaning forward with a mischievous grin. “Don’t protest too harshly, or your sister’s going to get *other ideas* for how to get you back for telling this whole household she wets the bed.”

“I *don’t*. Do that. Don’t *say it* like that.”

“I was being honest!” Dami cried. “I didn’t realize it—well—I didn’t think too hard about how it could be taken.”

“Yes!” Winnie nodded enthusiastically, teeth sharp in her smile and tail flicking behind her. “Excuse it, Dami! Don’t *ever* take it back!”

“I didn’t mean it like that, I promise! And I’m sure your—I’m sure he didn’t take it that way!”

“You’re making it worse.” Tabi’s smile had absolutely no warmth.

Sometimes, Grace was very glad that she was an only child. For a given definition of it. She was not, under any circumstances, giving any sort of title around family to the other wraith of the household.

“When’s the wedding, Tabitha?” If Grace didn’t say anything this would escalate, she was certain of it.

“Ah, see?” Winnie cackled, reaching over to grab Tabi’s shoulder. Maybe it would escalate regardless if Winnie didn’t shut up. “It’s not all bad! Even after your secret was spilled, he still wants you!”

“Don’t say it like that either!” Tabi complained. Grace wanted to comment on the phrasing so, so badly. But she needed the room to cool down before things got heated and that singular mug went flying into someone’s face. Tabi took a deep, contemplative breath, closing her eyes. “I was thinking somewhere around autumn.”

Winnie’s eyes went wide.

Tabi’s lips curled into a smirk. “Got you good, didn’t I?”

Grace snorted into her hand. (The sound still traveled.) That sure was a way of shutting her up. Grace would have to tell Tabi about what her boyfriend had done — it was not good to be in the dark.

“I couldn’t really talk to Harri,” Tabi said with a slight sigh. “I’ll do that once we’re both better-rested. It’s been... a day.”

Dami perked up. “Oh! That’s a new name!”

Grace blinked, then circled the group. “It is,” she affirmed. “Don’t rush into things too fast with him, Tabitha. I was there when he picked that name out, as well as for everything that happened before.”

She had her full attention with that alone. “I wasn’t being serious, why do you say that?”

Grace wondered how this house managed, for the most part, to get its act together *right when* a few houseguests arrived. “Just last night, their group was a lot less of an united front than the two missing pieces would have you believe. There’s more than one fracture point in this pane of glass. Him and the chilly freak were getting... friendly. Nothing quite like guilt by association.”

“Grace, that’s rude to say,” Dami scolded.

“‘The chilly freak?’ He doesn’t seem very...”

Belatedly, Grace remembered they didn’t really have any context with how Cain could be. She could practically hear Tabi’s brain working to ask the first of what promised to be many questions.

“Is he a backstabber too?” Winnie beat her to the punch.

“Not really...” He was *very* direct with her. “He’s upfront with his intentions. It’s just that his intentions are... to mimic the events he saw onscreen.”

Winnie rose up. “I’m getting a knife.”

“The *final* ones, I mean, the ones he saw *himself* capable of,” Grace elaborated before Winnie could cross the room... then paused. “You can get a knife if you want, actually. But you aren’t his object of interest.”

She could see the gears turning in Tabi’s head. She *was* going to outright tell them what Cain was insisting on, what Harri thanked him for, what he got his hand bit open for trying... but, now that Tabi was thinking, it would be a mistake to interrupt her.

“He said... the him on the screen said,” Tabi corrected herself as she readied a quote, “he wanted the rest of them shoved somewhere quiet. That Quiet needed him and to not have the rest of them. But he—the real him—also said he didn’t want the others dead.”

Grace, despite how cold she was used to running, found herself shivering. She hoped that was right. She couldn’t be certain, though. From her brief time occupying the same body as him, he seemed rather flippant and open to new things at the drop of a hat. He killed her easily enough. And he still wasn’t sorry about it.

Tabi was still thinking. “One of the three, Ave, seemed... *aware* of something I hadn’t caught onto. Something about the options, and the way Quiet and him bickered, maybe? He had a certain disposition towards the other Voices... and he *insisted* it didn’t matter how long they’d been there. And...”

She could see it in her eyes. *Click, click.* They lit up. The answer was found. She glanced up at Grace, then furrowed her eyebrows. “...He suggested Quiet needed to either stop feeling, or *forget*. He was going to make him forget last night, wasn’t he? Like how we couldn’t see what happened in all those missing chapters?”

Despite herself, Grace smiled as she nodded. It was an impressive thing to watch her mind work. “Got it, detective.” *You solved the murder. Now can you find the murderee?*

Not that it would change anything, but she appreciated the effort nonetheless.

“And you’re saying Harri— what? He remembers everything from yesterday!” Tabi said, raising her voice just a bit, not appreciating the accusation of conspiracy.

“Quiet remembers,” Grace said, slightly insulted. *It’s not like I would’ve let that happen.* “Credit where it’s due: Harri gave Cain the bandage on his hand; Ave gave what’s underneath it.”

Winnie’s smile when Grace said that was, admittedly, rather disturbing. Then she blinked, expression thankfully clearing up. “Wait, why do you get the Decider as your shard? Since when is that fair?”

“I’m special like that.”

Click. Tabi’s eyes lit up. *Oh no. She can find the murderee.* She stood, moving as if to grab Grace with her bare hands, then froze in place, realizing. She pointed at her almost aggressively. “You! You and Cain are the outliers—Cain *killed you*? That’s why you called him a freak! The amnesia had nothing to do with it, that’s your baseline, you said it like it was natural.” The weight of what she said seemed to hit her in the chest. She staggered back onto the bed. “He *killed you*.”

She inhaled. She did not need to, but the gesture...

It had not hurt, not really. She remembered a pinch. She remembered being embarrassed at how easily she went down. She remembered feeling nothing at all.

She remembered a body that moved like a machine. Silent and impossibly precise, without hesitation or remorse in his eyes, that ran at her out of nowhere with an edge pointed at her heart. She remembered how impossible it was to predict. She remembered how he regarded her, staring down at her fading body with the most horrid intensity in those eyes. Waiting until she was gone, ensuring he finished the job, or...?

She remembered being stuck. Trapped. Lost. Stranded. She could not move. She could not breathe. She could not open her eyes. She didn’t exist, not really, not in that transitional state between something like life and something unlike anything else. Couldn’t feel, or think,

or be. She remembered the sound of metal scraping against dry bones which used to be hers, the familiar sound of metal slicing through meat, the sound of blood gurgling in a throat.

She remembered being somewhere new. (She remembered meeting someone new too. The creature before her couldn't be the same that killed her, could it? Him? There was a warmth, somewhere, in those eyes. A gentle compassion, an exhaustion, a vulnerability to the world and its cruelties. Her true killer was as still as the death she met at his hands. It couldn't be the same person.)

She remembered conversation, and apologies, and a ride. She remembered a memory pretending to be a person. She remembered shards of glass scattered on the floor, refracting blue light and pale nothing. One clean, one wet with blood.

She remembered, at the time, thinking that blood was hers.

"He's *not* mine," She exhaled. The gesture was comforting, if pointless. "I don't claim him."

"I get it," Winnie's tone had taken on a serious edge to it. "I don't care for mine, either. Being murdered puts a bad taste in the mouth."

"Does this mean we can claim whoever?" Dami was frowning.

"Why choose him specifically?" Tabi asked. She glanced to Winnie, careful not to make direct eye contact, then away. "You had at least one other option."

"He apologized, for one. But Nando's right, he's not *mine*. No, you didn't see what I did." Nor was it something she'd share. It wasn't her secret to tell. Even if they knew some of it. "What happened in the cabin shouldn't define us," she said, and then she looked at Dami.

Maybe they shouldn't talk about it now. Maybe it was too raw. Maybe she just didn't want to see Dami more upset than she already was. But of course, while she was thinking, someone else made the choice for her.

"When are you going to dump that sorry sack, anyway?" Winnie asked with all the delicate subtlety that a bull has.

Dami jumped, overbalancing in such a way she almost fell backwards off the bed. "What?"

Tabi's hand darted to her shoulder to help her regain balance. "I..." she paused, seeming to contemplate her next words carefully, and then— "have to agree." —seemingly gave up.

"I can't do that!"

"I can," Winnie said, scooting forward. "Point me in a direction, Dami, I'm *ready*."

"That's even worse!" Dami muffled herself by putting her head in her hands. "I don't know. Can't I just talk to him?"

"I think we all know how that would go."

“No way you’re talking to him alone after all we learned.”

“You should see other people,” Grace offered leadingly. Dami’s face snapped out of her hands, eyes huge. *Do you have someone in mind?* She concealed a smirk. “Spend time with your sister, your friends, you know?”

“Like you should’ve had time to do before he invited himself to stay the night,” Tabi grumbled.

“What did you want me to do? Say no?” Everyone, bar Dami, tensed. Grace grimaced. “He has never done anything to me! It was just a ‘what if,’ right?”

“A *shockingly* easy to stumble upon ‘what if,’” Tabi amended. “All it took was a far-too-forward suggestion and a single rejection to spiral into that.”

“Unstable thing.” Winnie nodded. “Never know when the stick’s gonna snap, but when you hear it, you know something unsightly’s on its way.”

“Even if he hasn’t done anything yet, you saw the way Quiet talked about him and he wasn’t even,” Tabi gagged on her own air, “his ‘main priority.’ He’s dangerous.”

“Whatever you decide, you won’t have to do it alone,” Grace said placatingly. There was no way they’d convince her to do such a leap of faith in one night.

Dami’s eyes watered. She brushed at them with her palms. Lucky thing she’d already taken her makeup off; smeared mascara wasn’t fun to clean up. She sniffed. “I know.”

“There, there, don’t cry, you look like a tomato.” Tabi patted her red-faced sister on the back. She didn’t look like she appreciated the comparison, even if it was apt.

Dami mumbled something that sounded like ‘and you like a raccoon when you cry’.

Tabi laughed quietly under her breath. It took some time for Dami to compose herself. In that time, there was space to think. To wonder. And, from the glint in Tabi’s eyes, apparently to come up with topics for gossip.

“‘For one,’ huh?” Tabi said, looking Grace in the eye. “What were your *other* reasons?”

“Had to be the wings,” Dami commented, her face cleared up. “Did you *see them*, Tabi?”

“Oh, we saw them alright.” Winnie grinned as Tabi nodded like a general at war.

“He didn’t have his wings when I picked him up!” Grace said defensively. She’d taken to mimicking the other girls’ sitting positions, cross-legged with her hands folded politely in her lap. Just in the air. Had to keep the living humble. “A girl doesn’t just pick her killer by his looks, you know. There are many things to appreciate in a guy.”

“Oh, so *that’s* why you picked him as your shard...” Tabi mumbled, resting her chin on her hand. Grace balked, turning to see the smuggest grin she’d ever seen on Winnie’s face—and

Dami's eyes positively *sparkling*. *Oh no. This is terrible*. "You know he's a little young for you?"

"I told you before, my killer's a sweet guy." Whatever they were thinking, that was not it.

"How so?" Tabi asked leadingly. Dami nodded enthusiastically beside her.

"He's compassionate—"

"He stabbed you," Winnie interrupted Grace immediately, scoffing.

She turned on her, her face tense and voice terse. She could feel her hair billowing out behind her. "Let me speak."

Winnie startled, her posture straightening out, her ears flattening a little against her head. It was moments like these where Grace recalled how Winnie and Beast were sisters, though she doubted Winnie would claim that. Her ears weren't wholly mobile, like a cat's were, but their slight flexibility was just uncanny enough for little motions like that. She recovered, hunching back over with a flick of her tail, grumbling gibberish under her breath.

Grace shrugged it off. She'd spooked her housemates more times than she hadn't. "As I was *saying*: my killer has a good heart in him. Open-minded, a real pal. He admitted he was wrong, apologized, and did his best to make it up to me. That was our *real* first meeting, and that's how I know him: his capacity to change, for better or worse. And he chose to be better."

That wasn't to say he didn't have his flaws, considering the entire roster of who got out alongside her. But that was for another topic.

That wasn't it, though, was it? Her first impression of him was an impression of someone else, her second impression being her first chance to really get to know him. But there was something beyond *just* what happened in the cabin. Something here, in this house, that felt like where she belonged, where she was supposed to be.

How did she stand her two month stay in the house where all the girls were, to begin with? When she had been so eager to not be confined within walls?

"The events in the cabin don't define us," Grace repeated herself, thinking. "I learned that from him. He didn't say it, not with words, but I felt it when I was inside him."

Tabi choked. Good. Grace winked at her when she recovered enough to look her in the eyes again. "You mean when you *possessed him*?"

"Not just like that, I asked first! It was pretty awkward at first, painful, but aren't all first times like that?"

Winnie shoved a fist on her mouth as she collapsed on Dami's shoulder for balance. Tabitha was averting her eyes again.

"It took time to get comfortable enough to start moving," Grace said, stretching. (No tendons popped.) "There were some involuntary movements neither of us were expecting. Twitches, convulsions. I guess I could have been gentler, it was a little hard for him to walk, after... but we made do."

Winnie was making a sound very reminiscent of a tea kettle. Grace was a little surprised to see Dami being the last of the group standing, politely covering her mouth with a single hand, shoulders just barely trembling with a contained giggle. Tabi, in comparison, was cringing away like a crumpled paper bag.

"Can you go back to being *sappy*?" The latter begged. "I'd prefer that over this."

"That wasn't being sappy, that was just the truth." Grace corrected. "He took me in like I was welcome. Like who I was, what I became, what happened to me... was just one more event in a long line of events, and it didn't have to define me. There's more to me than my death," she sighed. "And more to life than what he took. Something beautiful beyond it all, free of pain or suffering. I feel like it'd be worth seeing, with him. And I think he feels the same."

Dami was looking at her like she understood the secrets of the universe. She looked happier than she'd been since they had arrived there.

Winnie wasn't looking very impressed. "But admit it, the wings took it up a notch today. Physically speaking."

Grace thought about it. *Oh*, she thought about it. She thought about their shape, their contour, their impressive wingspan. But mostly she thought about Quiet, and how Quiet stood with them, and then she opened her mouth. "He looks good with them. *Very* good. They fit him well. He's standing straighter than he was yesterday; you three didn't have the unique privilege of seeing the before and after, but I can appreciate that change enough all by myself. I can't deny he looks nice, we all have eyes, but I also saw the way he looked at us back, and that was nicer. He looks proud of himself, I like that. I like a man with confidence in his eyes."

"Makes sense you're into monochrome, you're a ghost." Winnie said.

"First of all, rude."

Dami pulled Winnie's arm to chastise her quietly. Something about '*you can't just say someone's a ghost.*'

"And incorrect," Tabi couldn't help but say. "Monochrome is when there's something painted with one color only. Quiet is more... grayscale, as far as color palettes go."

"Bookhead," Winnie spat. "No wonder you took spectacles, you two make a pair and a half."

Tabi raised an eyebrow at her. "I didn't 'take' anyone."

"We all saw the way you look at him!" Winnie insisted, gesturing to the two others in the room.

“Nobody saw— lower your hand, Dami,” Tabi said.

Dami put her hand down. “I wasn’t going to do anything! But I did see you seeing him.” She leaned back over to Winnie, covering her face to conspiratorily whisper in her ear. Winnie nodded.

“What? What are they whispering about?” Tabi turned to Grace.

“Let them scheme,” Grace dismissed. They weren’t scheming about *her*. And she wanted to see it play out. *And* she genuinely couldn’t hear their plotting, not that she’d admit to being innocent.

“What do you even *see* in him?” Winnie said at a normal volume. “I don’t think he’s looked at Grace in the eyes *once*. And his face is long and weird.”

“Yes, and yours is gorgeous, I assume?” sarcasm dripped from Tabi’s words.

“He can be charming,” Dami noted a little too quietly. Winnie bristled.

There were two (unnecessarily loud) knocks on the door. Grace watched as the other girls braced for impact. A short pause that might’ve been the length of a heartbeat or two (Grace wouldn’t know), and then the door swung open with such a force that Grace was impressed with the durability of the opposing wall. Had she been standing on the floor, she would’ve felt it vibrate, she was certain.

Who else to be ducked down under the doorframe after such an explosive entrance than Ava? Who didn’t look sheepish at all, naturally, despite the discussion in the room having been silenced and all its lingering attention brought onto her. Her horns brushed the ceiling when she walked in.

Dami waved. Grace herself said hi. Truth to be told, she was surprised Ava had left her bedroom at all after the day they just had.

“Good to see you clothed this time.” Grace... didn’t mean to say that aloud. She covered her mouth at the same time three very quizzical gazes snapped to her.

Ava grinned with her numerous teeth. “Disappointed?”

“*Relieved.*”

“What are you doing here?” Tabi thankfully saved her from having to continue that train of thought.

“I heard a girls’ talk brewing,” Ava said, inviting herself in. Her tone implied she had more to say, and yet only a step in and she was instead left glaring at the state of the room. The *lack* of state of the room. There was plenty of room for her to sit somewhere, but no place to sit. “What kind of room doesn’t have a chair? What *is* this?”

“A temporary thing, I’m sure,” Tabi said.

“Better be,” Ava snorted. “But even temporary things can survive a crumb of personality. Dami, tomorrow we’re going out and finding things to stuff in here.”

“Okay!” she agreed readily. “But you better talk to Quiet about it first.”

“I’m still not convinced this is his room,” Winnie said.

“Move over.” Ava stood at the bed’s frame, realizing there was not an Ava-sized gap for her. Winnie glared at her, firmly sat. Grace wondered if she was about to get scruffed again. Tabi didn’t seem inclined to move.

Dami blinked, looking between them, then back at Ava. “I—”

“Alright, I got it,” Ava said at once, leaning down and picking up Dami in one smooth motion, twirling in place and sitting in her spot. Winnie might have hissed something, though the sound was drowned out by Dami’s high-pitched yelp in Grace’s ears. She was sat down delicately in Ava’s lap. It was an impressively smooth transfer, all things considered. “Now there’s room for everyone.”

Dami stammered something or other, looking up to see Ava behind her.

“What? I don’t make a comfortable seat for you?” Ava grinned.

“Um!” Dami broke eye contact. “Just surprising!”

Grace wondered if Ava was aware of Tabi delivering a very impressive... she didn’t know what to call it, but she was not aware eyebrows could go that high.

“...right, what were we talking about..?” Ava said as though she didn’t know exactly what she had done.

“What happened today,” Grace supplied.

“Boys.” Tabi rolled her eyes.

“Grace’s pseudo fucking,” Winnie said with a shit eating grin. Grace was not going to acknowledge such degeneracy with a reaction. She was a high-class lady!... Ava nodded at her approvingly. She curtly nodded back.

“Congrats, girl!” Ava went to pat Grace on the back. Her hand passed through, interrupted, her form as though she were nothing but air. It felt fast. Grace considered, thinking that if she *had* a body, that pat might’ve fractured her spine. To her credit, Ava shook off the chill in an instant, mist following the arcing path of her swing. “Who was the lucky guy? Or gal?”

Grace blinked. *Could* she possess one of the other girls? She tucked that idea away for later.

“Quiet, my killer, who else?”

“Is that why we’re all in his room?” Ava asked. Grace wasn’t sure if she should tell her Quiet was currently sleeping with another man tonight or not. Not that she had anything against

said man, on the contrary. Ava locked onto Grace at once. “You took good care of him, right?”

Something shifted in the room, a mutual understanding passing between them both. Tabi and Winnie stared at Ava, at her hardened expression, with sudden wariness. Dami, not getting a good angle, instead focused on Grace. Something softened in her expression in reaction to whatever face Grace was making.

“I wouldn’t let anything happen to him,” Grace answered. “I don’t *want* anything to happen to him.”

“Good, but it’s not just about that. You have to build him up, too. Be gentle when he needs it and be hard on him when you have to be.” Ava pressed down on the bed with her hands. Grace was glad she wasn’t holding onto Dami; the bed creaked, she wouldn’t want her bones doing the same.

“Who do you take me for?” She was trying hard to not be offended.

“With the right tools?” Ava grinned, loosening up. “A damn good lover. Can only imagine what kind of boost the wings gave him.”

“I don’t think he’s into that, anyway.” It wouldn’t surprise her, really. All the better for her too.

“We were talking about the *others*.” Tabi said with clenched teeth. “Winnie, you were saying about your shard?”

Winnie shook herself out of her stupor. “He’s a wretched, miserable, spineless thing. The makeover didn’t do him any favors, really. He has an extremely punchable face— I wouldn’t be surprised if your man hasn’t inverted his nose yet, Ava. I’d love the chance to wipe that smug grin off his face. Honestly, who does he think he is, fooling around with that suit and tie, as if he’s someone important! That does *not* look good with that disaster of a ponytail either. Don’t even get me started on that pathetic attempt of a goatee. And the trick he tried to pull on us, with the towels?” She stopped to take a breath. Several breaths.

“Fernando has a ponytail...” Dami mumbled.

“His is different!” Winnie shouted. Grace had to agree, to some extent. Oli’s whole look was well-manicured, with a lot of subtle work put into its maintenance. Nando was naturally stunning in a sort of mundane, average way; not *trying* to look approachable, but having a sort of friendly way about his walk and talk that made him so, anyway. Not particularly noteworthy in any direction, but not wholly unnoteworthy, either.

Tabi hummed, narrowing her eyes. “What about a pathetic attempt of a goatee?”

Winnie’s tail was whipping so fast Grace was half convinced it would start producing lift like a helicopter’s propeller blades. “Don’t even get me started! Do not *even* get me started!”

“Would you prefer if he had different facial hair?” Grace could see the physical effort it took Tabi to keep herself from smiling. Didn’t hide the teasing edge to her voice, though.

“I’d prefer if he had *no* facial hair!” Winnie huffed, crossing her arms. “At least then he’d give up a battle he clearly has no chance of winning! Though it’s just in his nature to push for a win he doesn’t deserve.”

“Clean shaven... remind you of anyone in particular?” Tabi finally broke out into a smile. Winnie’s tail stopped as she squinted at Tabi across the bed. Her nose twitched.

“What...? No, you’re trying to trick me into something with that!” Winnie, pointedly, stared at the wall at her side. “I will not be pulled into your sneaky games.”

“Sure. What about the chilly one?” from Tabi’s look, she was expecting a similar explosion as before. Maybe she wanted someone to rage at given she knew, now, who had extinguished Grace’s life. She appreciated it all the same.

“Cain?” Dami piped up as Winnie scoffed.

Grace had recognized him from the eyes. A face with the horrific perfection of a sculpture, empty in a way that enveloped until it choked you.

“What about him? He was more upfront than the other suit-and-tie bother, but a fool is still a fool and a stab wound is still a stab wound.” Winnie looked down at her hands, at her sharpened claws. She picked at the bedsheets absentmindedly. Grace hoped Quiet wasn’t overly fond of one of his few material possessions. Her voice turned dull, sour. “He’s not anyone’s and he ought to stay that way. Alone, maybe dead and buried someday.”

“...are you calling me a fool?”

“Not you, him,” Winnie said, raising her head to fix Grace a cruel stare. “The whole ‘element of surprise’ is cowardly filth, if you ask me.” Ava nodded along solemnly. “He’s not getting the jump on anyone, now. He’s revealed his whole hand. Ugly game he’s playing.”

“Speaking of game,” Tabi started, yet cut herself off when Winnie rolled her eyes, groaning loudly. “Shut it, Winnie-- we have to talk about it. We have to be on the same page, all of us.”

Grace watched Dami and Winnie exchange a glance.

Then looked to Tabi. She nodded. “Like what happened to us back at the house.”

“What do you mean by that?” Grace had to ask. Had something else happened there? Something worse than what she had heard?

Tabi looked at Grace, her eyes intense and searching. For what, Grace didn’t know, but she was looking so hard she might as well have been trying to burn a hole through her with her laser focus. “Would you say you feel *different*, here, than you felt before?”

“Different how?”

Tabi took a deep breath. Seemed to think things over. In the meantime, Grace and Ava looked at the other two.

“What is she talking about?”

Dami opened her mouth. Closed it. She shrugged, glancing over to Winnie, who started picking at the bed again.

“That *place*, ” Winnie spoke lowly, as if telling a secret. Tabi glanced her way, as did the rest of their group. “It’s not so different from the place we came from, is it? It’s just as tricky and ready to shift us out of shape, to keep us locked away right where it wants us. But it let the rest of them come and go as they pleased.” Her tail whipped from side to side. She licked her lips and bared her teeth. “It’s just a larger cabin.”

“The cabin wasn’t aware,” Tabi protested.

“Was it not so?” Winnie said, irritated.

“Not that I knew it. It was just a place, four walls that eroded as any stone brick would. But whatever was...” Tabi took another breath, long and slow. Dami held her hand, seeming to find her place despite her loss of words. “Whatever was holding us there, it was intelligent. It didn’t change me in a way I would’ve noticed, it just... it slowed me down. I can think faster, here—it was like before, something was holding me down. And if I had a thought it didn’t like, it plucked it right out of me. And I didn’t notice. I thought you would’ve noticed something was up, you’ve been here longer.”

“I didn’t feel anything,” Ava said. “You know thinking isn’t my thing. Besides, I’ve been busy.”

“Right,” Tabi replied, not deeming that fit for further response.

Grace lifted herself up, drifting around the room and trailing along its four walls. It was almost nostalgic, in a way. She closed her eyes, embracing the movement as she thought. *Did* this place feel different? Did *that* place feel different?... She tried to imagine a desire she wouldn’t have held, back there with the others.

Was that home?

...The thought of it, now, felt rather limiting. She didn’t imagine home as a singular place, not as one area she wanted to be confined to. Did she, back there? It wasn’t something she put in words. It was a feeling in her chest. Full and whole and soft and warm. It was an understanding beyond words; the thought that something like that could be tainted, altered, and she did not know it... acting on desires not truly her own... it terrified her.

“How did you escape?” Grace had to ask. There was no way she was going back if that was what awaited her. She was wanted, needed, here.

Tabi glanced up at Ava. “Brute force.”

“You’re kidding?” Ava smiled, reaching over to jostle Tabi’s shoulder. Her whole body was shaken by the force. Dami curled in a little to save herself from some of the motion. “Good for you, everyone has to start somewhere!”

“Not *literally*, just methodically,” Tabi clarified, fixing her hair. Ava’s smile did not drop; if anything, it grew wider. “I couldn’t stay there anymore. I couldn’t let Dami stay there. No—not because of *him*, Dami, but because of the others. Because of what I heard Thelka say. What she was doing. The others just—they aren’t *safe* to be around, am I alone in thinking that?”

Oh, absolutely not. Grace shivered to share, even superficially, commonalities in appearance with someone like Clara. Something as basic as floating, as not being quite alive. “Clara said she wanted to make the world afraid.”

“Why hasn’t she?” Dami hesitated to ask.

Tabi snapped her fingers. Her hand twitched as if aching for a pen to write with. “So it’s not just keeping us in one place, or together. Clara said she ‘forgot’ about that. How do you forget your one and only plan for the outside world?”

“Maybe...” Dami trailed off. “Maybe she’s decided the world doesn’t deserve to be scared, anymore?”

Winnie snorted. The following laugh was dark and ugly.

“But if she hasn’t, then...!” Dami turned to Winnie, her tone rising in pitch in her distress. Ava wrapped her arms loosely around Dami’s torso. “If she realizes, then she’ll start hurting people again!”

“Uh-huh,” Winnie said, recovering, “and she’s not sorry for hurting our Choice— ah, ‘Decider’ and his buddies, still, either. Never will be, I bet!”

Could ghosts-adjacents die? Grace was tempted to find out, at the reminder.

“There are just *bad people* out there in the world,” Winnie said, wrapping her tail around herself. She glared at an arbitrary spot on the bed. “Better that she stay in that little cabin-alike, and we hightail it out of there unseen. Isn’t it her nature to be locked away in the dark, anyway?”

“She certainly doesn’t want to be locked away in the dark,” Tabi pointed out.

“Nature isn’t what you want,” Winnie muttered. “It’s what you are.”

“But,” Tabi continued, “the Thing in the Dark *did* say she was ‘exactly where she was supposed to be’...”

The room stalled. Dami stared at her sister. “What? I didn’t...”

“Where did you hear *that*?” Winnie asked.

Tabi froze. Her hand gestured as if clicking a pen. “I might have... played the game. As a refresher. Without anyone else.”

“Why would you do that?!” Winnie yelled, as Grace chastised, “that’s clearly bad news!”

“Well, I didn’t *progress*! It wouldn’t work!” Tabi said. “I opened it just to see. It has a save feature, actually, but we hadn’t been saving anything. It had saves in the Long Quiet—”

“Where?” Winnie asked, her face scrunching up.

“—the dark place,” Tabi clarified, “one after each point after the others... disappeared, in the Mirror. After it ‘made them leave.’ I could see all the Explore options. But when I tried to have the Entity—the *Thing* send me back, the glass shattered and it told me I died—and then the game just *crashed*. Wouldn’t put me back at Chapter I.”

“Are you sure Grace or Clara didn’t mess with it?” Ava asked.

“I’ve been here the whole time.” Grace reminded her, trying to not shiver at the implications. “What did you find, Tabi?”

Tabi stood. “Let me get my notes.”

That night, neither of them slept well.

It was Nando who jolted awake first, but when his eyes instinctively flickered to his right, he found Quiet pulling himself out of his dreams right after him. They crossed glances, finding the other hugging himself close with frantic sheens coating his face.

Nando drew a long breath, eyes half-lidded and voice drained. “You were gone.”

Quiet’s eyes widened, and Nando realized he had spoken aloud. His throat closed up. How to explain the impossibility of it? Quiet wasn’t supposed to *die* -die, not without Hero following. It wasn’t even a declaration, it was how things worked back then.

To think it could happen in any other way was anathema. To think they could wake up in the woods with a filled silence of yet another voice but a missing piece was out of turn. To think that there would be no ‘they,’ no ‘we’ or ‘us,’ just him... That was not how the story went. And yet something irregular within him *screamed* that he *couldn’t let it happen again*—

Quiet’s face darkened—and in the same heartbeat, he scooted a little closer to him. In the heartbeat between whatever revelation he had and when Nando posed his next question his way, it hit him in some distorted way how touched he was. He was still needed.

“What about yours?” It came, small and exhausted. “What was yours about?”

Quiet answered him with the same exhaustion. The same empty terror.

“...You were gone.”

The air went dead between them.

The memory of (*Truth*) pushed past him and he felt his body reject it as he pulled away from Quiet, shaken.

(*Dismissal*) (*Guilt*) (*Failure*) *You shouldn't be proud of me.*

(*Alarm*) (*Rejection*) (*Hurt*) (*Concern*) *Why?*

Nando struggled for an answer. '*I hurt you.*' '*I let you get hurt, and that's just as bad.*' '*I can't protect you and everything I tried made things worse.*' None were good enough to convey his remorse. He couldn't apologize for things he couldn't remember, and what he *could* remember was too bad to speak of.

Quiet rose from their shared bed and Nando's heart sunk. He didn't follow. If Quiet wanted to be alone, or simply leave *him* alone, that would have to be fine with him. He had to be okay with that. He was prepared to be left, back in that last cabin. It was cruel of Quiet to let him hope to be accepted, to be free to stick with him if he really wanted—to be *wanted* and *chosen*, explicitly—just to rip that hope away, but Quiet had the right.

And Quiet spread his wings.

Nando did not breathe. Not when, in the dark of the room, those feathers seemed darker still, almost illuminated in the absence of light. They were clearer in the dark, not through bioluminescence but through a reunion with their element. Their color was discernible, here. Something of the cosmos, something beautiful, a color Nando struggled to name. It looked good on Quiet. It suited them.

More than that, though. When had Nando's thread tangled it so, when had it twisted around Quiet's body? Once, twice, thrice; the loops went on and on. Was it just his, the one that had him bound? Maybe, it meant something.

Maybe that was why he was his. Nando, Ciro, Paco, all the Voices embodied missed opportunities, were the lack of luck, and it landed them with someone who couldn't deserve it less.

(He could break. Nando must be the glue.)

He held his breath as Quiet turned back to him. He wanted to look at his face, see his expression, but his eyes kept getting drawn back to his wings. A thought stirred somewhere in his brain, too tired to impede itself with filters: *they look soft*. He held his breath as, slowly, Quiet leaned back—one wing folding in one smooth motion, and the other stretching out across the room, the bed, across him. He held his breath as he was, for lack of a better word, swaddled by his wing.

Two words immediately came to mind, *soft* and *warm*. He was essentially being smothered in a living weighted blanket. It was remarkably calming.

He did not raise his hands. He did not move. He did not dare to breathe. But he needed to ask, so he spoke in the remainder of his breath, “is this okay?”

Quiet blinked, staring at Nando in the dark. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“You tensed when Cain touched you,” Nando said lowly. “I figured they were... sensitive, somehow. That it was hurting you.”

“No,” Quiet sighed. “It was— nice. Just a lot to take in, all at once, the way he was...” He trailed off, apparently at a loss for words, then shook his head. Quiet leaned, the weight of his exposed wing pressing down on Nando’s chest a little tighter. Somehow, things felt lighter. “This is okay. I want to cover you up.”

Whatever sort of tiredness he still felt evaporated.

That was... a little unfair. For him. Nando wished, just a little, that he could do something for him, too. His hands moved so he could cover Quiet up with the blankets properly. It was cold still. He didn’t want him to get sick.

Quiet shifted, and Nando’s hands stalled, instinctively returning back under his ‘blanket’ as the person it belonged to turned to look at him properly. “Now, why can’t I be proud of you?”

Talking, vocally, was still to the left of ‘normal’ even with two months of practice. And that was when he knew what to say. He stared at the ceiling in silence, in lieu of an answer, thinking. The weight of Quiet’s wing was as grounding as it was distracting. Stuck in a moment he both did and didn’t want to be in.

“It’s all my fault,” he said, finally. That seemed to about sum it up.

“...What?” Maybe not. Even a few months in, Nando was still amazed in how much it could be conveyed in just an expression. He didn’t have that luxury with Quiet, before.

“Today, with Dami,” Nando started, choosing the most relevant topic, the easiest example, “you said I was the one to suggest staying in the cabin. I—there was no reason to, she *clearly* wasn’t a threat, and because of me...”

“I’m sorry, who’s the Decider here? I doubled down.”

“Yes, but I’m the one who asked for it.”

“What was I supposed to do? Tell you no?” Quiet asked. Nando had no clue why he was asking *that*. The obvious answer was *yes. Absolutely. It was wholly unnecessary. It only caused you pain. I ruined food for you.* “You were right when you said it. It seemed like a happy ending for everyone. And I wanted it, too. To just—take in a moment to breathe, to rest. We were safe, I thought.”

“And my suggestion made us—”

“*Felipe* was the unsafe element there.”

“And I make you stick by unsafe things. My only suggestions were things that put you in danger.” Nando ducked his head, sighing into Quiet’s wing. It pulled back from his discontent breath, just enough for him to feel a slight chill from the surrounding room.

“I knew all along Felipe and Borja weren’t safe to be around, and I still allowed it.” Nando insisted.

“We couldn’t have known things would turn out that badly,” Quiet said with sudden clarity. The sound of shuffling followed alongside the shifting of the weight on Nando’s chest, lightly pressing down. Warm again. He turned to see Quiet leaning towards him. “You were looking for a third option that could save everyone. Without you, I *couldn’t* have... I wouldn’t *be here*.”

It was an earnest statement. Something twisted in Nando’s chest, running itself into knots, guilt weaving through him. In an instant, his position changed from reassuring to smothering, unable to move out from beneath the crushing weight of a comfort he didn’t deserve. “I took too long.”

“What are you talking about?” Quiet asked, baffled. “I should have waited for you.”

“You shouldn’t have needed to. You shouldn’t have had to face her alone,” Nando insisted. The mere mention of her had Quiet tensing, the wing over Nando no longer laying on top of him comfortably, instead snapped straight and hovering slightly above him. Trembling. Frozen. A beautiful thing not meant to exist so pristine in the presence of her name, of even an allusion to it.

“I didn’t,” Quiet tried to smile, but his voice was brittle. “You came for me.”

Nando sucked in a breath. He didn’t want to run in circles, but Quiet was resilient. “Not the *first* time. I was *not* fast enough, the first time. You *were* alone, the first time, because I wasn’t there for you.”

“And then you were.” Quiet said. Skipping over the eternity of torture he experienced at her hands, skipping over the network of scars, skipping over everything Nando *let* happen. Like it would erase all that from existence. Like Nando was some sort of knight in shining armor.

“Not before she hurt you,” and that was the unforgivable thing. All the rest were simple offshoots and branches of the same idea: the pain he stood by and let Quiet feel, the pain he could have prevented. “Even the second time, she was hurting you. I’ve seen it—I’ve seen her...”

“Have you?” His tone was quiet, monotone. Nando paused. Closed his eyes. Felt the weight of the world curling around him, soft and gentle and easy. Coaxing the answer out of him. *‘Later,’ you promised.*

“Yes.”

The weight curled around him. He felt the tension in its joints, the incremental movements of its musculature, careful to cradle him as if something terrible had happened that he needed to

be hidden away from. But nothing happened to him. Everything happened to Quiet.

Still. He would speak, if Quiet wanted him to. “It was a dream. I don’t know if it was real, but it sure *felt* real.” He opened his eyes to glance towards Quiet. Something in his expression made him stare up at the ceiling, instead. “I met her. She grabbed me—” The wing curled around him tighter. He was starting to feel real snug. Was Quiet overexerting himself? Did he need to tell him to stop? “—and decided, after a moment, to try discussion instead of drowning, for a change. Well. A bit of both.”

“*Drowning?*” his voice was shaky with horror. Stricken. Nando had... forgotten, Quiet didn’t know about that particular thing. There were a lot of things he hadn’t talked to him about.

“That’s...” Nando was at a loss for words. He regretted saying that. He’d prefer if Quiet didn’t know about that, actually. But he couldn’t think of anything to (*Lie*) with. Neither of them were particularly good at it. “That’s where we were. Jumbled up.”

“‘We?’ Who... not *everyone*?” Quiet’s voice cracked. Nando hated that sound. “Not everyone, Connie was...”

Yes. He could keep that one up. He finished, “...where you left him.” He would not look to his side. He couldn’t. “I was with everyone. Everyone *else*, I mean.”

“She killed you. That’s why I couldn’t find you? No,” Quiet mumbled, almost to himself. “I made you die, and She wanted to kill you again?”

“It was nothing you did—”

“The Mirror,” Quiet said. It was a full statement. Nando did his best not to react. “I killed you at the Mirror. Every time. Every time, everyone died and I remained, because I decided it. Every single time we died it was because of my decisions.”

“There was nothing else you could have done,” he said after. As much as Nando cursed whatever that ‘game’ actually was, hadn’t it showed them that? No other choice, not really.

“I still should’ve— it’s still my fault,” Quiet interrupted himself. His wing shuffled unconsciously. Nando remembered being told whatever was on the other side of the Mirror was going to be nice. This was nice. He hadn’t lied.

“I trusted you. Still trust you,” Nando said. “There were a lot of hard choices you made. And some of them weren’t even yours. Sometimes we died because of the others, right? Or her. *Most* of the time it was her, even.”

He did not think of the choice he enabled Quiet to make in order to find Grace. He did not think of what he told them to do, or what might’ve been if he hadn’t spoken at all. He did not think about him *die* -dying, either. *That was a nightmare. It didn’t happen.*

“I know you had no other choice in the cabin, but you have a choice, now,” Nando heard Quiet murmuring. “You aren’t stuck with me like back then. I’m surprised everyone took this long to branch out.”

Nando couldn't choose which statement to refute first. "I wasn't 'stuck with you.' I would've followed your lead, same body or not, cabin in the woods or not. I'm still here because I already made that choice. I made it the moment everything we went through came back to me and I came back to you. I would make it every time." *Until the day I die.*

For the life of him, Nando couldn't imagine why the others would choose differently, what lenses they viewed what they went through, how they could blame Quiet instead of themselves.

"I *hurt* you," Quiet said. Nando wondered how he lied with such conviction in his voice. "You followed my lead and I led us to death, to pain, to suffering. Everything I went through, you and the others did too. Went through it *worse*. I dragged you by the wrist through the worst events of our lives and you endured it to your absolute limit and... and you shouldn't have had to. I should've known better, led us somewhere better."

"Is this not somewhere better?" Nando asked. He watched him stall, then, seemingly struck by the question. He hoped Quiet heard it rhetorically. He wasn't saying anything, neither in agreement nor dissent. He needed it to sink in, just for his own sake. "Nothing you did, nothing *she* did, can change that we're here, now. That you were the one who brought us here. It's over now. You did the right thing. We're both— we're *all* here. And we never have to go back."

"Is it over? *Really* over?"

"Yes." And he didn't feel like he was lying. It had to be over.

"But your dream--"

"Might be nothing," he insisted. It had to be.

A brief silence. A short pause. Then, quietly, hesitantly, "you said you saw Her. What... did you see?"

What could he say? How her eyes were an unnatural color. Everything about her was unnatural, actually- or maybe too natural, to the point of being unnatural. She was too much all at once, her darks too dark, her colors too bright. In most aspects, Quiet was soft where she was rough. Every angle of hers was too sharp, her colors violent in their vibrance.

"Her shape--" he started, wondering if he wasn't being too obvious. "It kept changing. Water, bodies, blood. Ocean, hands, death. She told me things that weren't true, I told her things that were. She didn't like that."

"What things?"

Nando decided, from the tone of Quiet's voice, that he wouldn't mention her more... *possessive*, comments. Or actions. Or choices in clothing. "That I couldn't resist her forever, I'd die eventually and she'd live forever, such and such. Too bad I already did resist her. And won. And neither of us would be returning, because she was miserable company."

The admiration in Quiet's voice was clear. "You're braver than I am."

Flattery was never something Nando had a strong defense for. He nuzzled into Quiet's wing, a moment, trying not to soak it in too noticeably. Trying not to preen. *Not the time*. Despite himself, he felt a bit of pride make it to his head and open his mouth. "Not too bad a showing from a 'delusion,' eh?"

Quiet's face scrunched up in disgust at the word. It never really meant much to Nando, really; the Narrator had said it so much, so often, over such small things that it started to lose all meaning in the first place. The attack bounced off of his hardened skin. "You too?" Quiet's voice finally processed, and suddenly the word *did* have meaning again, and its use against Quiet was *wrong*.

"She told you you were a 'piece'?"

"Told me I was delusional every time I disagreed with Her. Or when I tried to say my piece," his eyes went distant. No. *No*. "She never... what's the word... admitted, I guess, that we hurt each other."

The conversation lapsed, then, Nando at a loss for words to properly communicate his grievances with her and all she did, and Quiet lost somewhere he didn't want him to be. Somewhere Nando doubted Quiet wanted to be, either. He, carefully, tapped Quiet's wing with the palm of his hand from underneath, brushing against his feathers. He could feel them twitch and jolt in reaction as the wing shifted away from him, but Quiet stirred, looking at him instead of a point in his vague direction. He blinked slowly at him, as if coming out of a daze. Not quite all the way back, yet... But he'd pulled away from that touch. Nando raised his hands to Quiet's wing, proper, where his bones and joints were and the contour feathers were not so thickly layered, and patted it twice. He did not flinch. He shifted, but he did not shift away, the wing relaxing into Nando's hand. *Okay. Good to know. I've got you.*

It was late, and they were both tired, and he should just close his eyes and stop admiring how Quiet's face looked, unscarred. It would take time getting used to it. Like his wings. He was taking time now, in both cases, though if he were honest with himself, he hoped he wouldn't get used to his wings. He wanted them to be special forever.

His eyelids were heavy, and he could already feel his breathing deepening in preparation for actual sleep, before he heard a muted, "I'm sorry."

He felt prompted to return it. But he wasn't awake enough for words. Just...

(Confusion) ...? (Care) (Comfort)

(Care) (Comfort) You deserved a break. (Remorse) I'm sorry I couldn't provide it.

(Acceptance) I have it now. You're enough.

...

He closed his eyes. It was comfortable, there, like that. Warm.

(Truth) I'm proud of you, too. Thank you.

Dami's head was starting to pound. Staying up late wasn't her idea of a fun time, staying up late somewhere she didn't know and having to force her brain to work, even less. The night was for sleeping, in her humble opinion.

But even with a headache, she could still see. And remember. That single cut hidden by Winnie's wrist. Was it still healing? Was it overtaken by roots and brambles and flowers? Why wonder if she could ask?

"Are you okay?"

She'd made sure the two of them were alone in Quiet's room before asking. Still, Winnie glanced around the room as if Dami meant to ask someone else. "*Me?*" She asked at once, pointing to her chest.

Maybe it was because the both of them had already lost a hand, that they didn't think twice about blades cutting into their flesh. A temporary pain, not even all the way through... just to check. To see.

But it wasn't okay. So Dami nodded, reaching up to take Winnie's raised hand in hers. She squirmed a little at the contact. "I saw," she said, carefully running her thumb up to her wrist to emphasize the implication.

Winnie went stiff, her tail flicking straight up for a moment. She slid out of Dami's grip so smoothly it was almost as if she never flinched at all. "Saw what, hm? Saw nothing, I'm sure. Saw something that wasn't there, I bet."

Dami outstretched her hand, open, but did not reach to grab Winnie again. "Can I see again?"

Winnie did not lean back, but her head tilted up and to the side as if repulsed by the sight of Dami's palm. Her tail swished, leaning off the bed. Swish, swish. Dami waited. Swish, swish, swish. Dami pulled her hand back, just a bit, and Winnie placed her wrist in her hand. She cupped it delicately as Winnie scoffed, looking off to some point to her left.

The cut was light, practically invisible at this stage. Little purple blossoms lined its edges, petals of lavender framing the injury unimpeded and unplucked. Even further out, they changed to green, then yellow.

Without all this ornamentation, soon it would be like it never happened at all.

Dami's voice caught in her throat. She brushed aside some of the petals for no real reason at all. Were they rooted deeply? Would it hurt to dig them up? She wouldn't try, not unless she was asked to. But the flowers weren't very pretty, like this, Dami thought. She would prefer that her friend not be the soil of the garden on which other things blossom; she'd prefer Winnie just be her friend. "Did it bleed?"

"As much as yours hurt," Winnie murmured.

It was... relieving, to see they both could feel pain, there. To have proof that things were different, that they could keep being different even for them, a damsel and a witch.

“Are we okay?” Dami asked, quietly. The structure of this room, all of its empty space, made for acoustics that seemed to echo the question back at her, silently.

“I will be. You?”

“...I think,” Dami started, releasing Winnie’s arm. She closed her eyes in her contemplation, then opened them and tried to smile. “Everything is going to be okay.”

She sighed. “If you say so. But that’s not what I asked.”

Dami glanced away, nervously grabbing at her free arm. She tapped her fingers together. She rubbed her arm. She pulled her hands together, politely, at her front... and she shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“That’s also not an answer.”

Incredibly, Dami could see some similarities between Winnie and her sister. That steel in their eyes. The stern lean, so their stare could more effectively pierce through her. “I’m tired, and my head hurts, and this room is weird and sad. And too many things have been happening too fast. I want things to slow down and be normal. And I want to hug— my sister.”

Winnie probably wouldn’t appreciate a hug, being who she was. She glanced towards the door, probably thinking about getting Tabi to come back to deal with Dami before she got overly emotional again. She scooted across the bed, probably to shoo Dami away because she was making her uncomfortable.

And then she, very awkwardly, wrapped her arm around Dami’s shoulders, and pulled her side into... Dami guessed it was supposed to be a hug. She retracted it only about a couple seconds later, and scooted back across the bed to an appropriate distance. It looked like it never happened at all. But it did. It all did.

“Thank you,” Dami made sure to say.

“Don’t mention it. Seriously, don’t.”

Tabitha couldn’t be gladder that Harri had not yet gone to sleep. With confident steps, she strode into a room that seemed cleaved in half.

Half of it had the wall completely covered by book spines, the original color of the paint impossible to discern. It was like an out-of-control growth, starting semi-reasonably from a singular bookshelf at the far wall and progressing until the shelves were built into the walls, then the walls omitted entirely in favor of complete shelf-space. Even the doorframe itself was built, potentially modified, to serve as a bookshelf. And then there was no more wall, so floor space held boxes, cabinets, drawers, the surfaces of which also held stacks and piles of

books. Sticky notes and cards were intermingled, annotations and notes scattered throughout the most organized mess Tabi had ever seen.

Wedge between more books in such a way Tabi immediately qualified as ‘dangerous’ and an end table with the lamp shining brightly, was the one uniform blotch of color in that half of the room. A bed with a yellow comforter. And in front of it, her... in front of it, Harri, clearly in the middle of dressing for the night.

He turned to her, squinting— she’d never seen him without his glasses —hands fumbling with the top button of his pajamas. It was a simple set, cuffed on its sleeves and at the end of its pants, matching with a baby blue exterior and darker, on the interior as revealed by its collar around his neck. It had a complex pattern design on the exterior fabric, a mismatch of white and indigo symbols, letters and shapes and lines all the way across. Some of those shapes, in the madness, almost looked like charts or graphs. An equation made of fabric, the answer to which was soft, sweet sleep.

In the brief moments it took for him to fix his button, Tabi saw. He had a scar on his neck, she realized. She had done that. *She* had done that. Had she ever apologized?

“I have to show you something,” she said instead. In place of a greeting, too. Neither of them had need for that.

Harri dragged his hand over the end table, looking for his glasses. “What is it?”

“Notes about the game. About things you didn’t see.”

Harri ducked his head, unfolding his glasses and putting them on. “Bring it over,” he said, sitting on the bed and patting the space next to him.

She eyed the chair in front of the desk, but decided to sit next to him, notebook in hand.

“The Entity, the Thing in the dark,” Tabi started, opening it up and so that half of it was in her hands and the other half was in Harri’s. “You said it’s a god.”

“Transformation, or most of it,” Harri agreed, grazing the edge of the notebook’s cover as he settled in. “That’s all we were told. But observation is more important than hearsay.”

“I went back into the game and was able to review the in-between sections. The place in-between— when we first meet it, it calls that place ‘The Long Quiet.’” She pointed to where she transcribed the Entity’s dialogue. “Isn’t that...?”

Harri traced underneath the words with his index finger, leaning in to read the words. “That’s strange. Why does it know Quiet’s name— his title— already? How could it mix that up with the place it was in, instead of the person it’s seeing?”

“Maybe the place is somehow connected to Quiet?” Tabi hypothesized.

“He said he was in a Construct.”

Tabi hummed, unsure what to make of that. A construct, something man-made, and two gods. Could gods be artificial? “It calls itself a city, those are constructed.”

“You think that’s a connection?”

“I’m not sure,” Tabi said, turning the page. “Look: it has a lot to say about cities. First, it’s a solitary one, just flickering lights. But then, when it... takes another one of us, it has more to say. ‘Pockets of vitality and movement,’ connecting together. And by the time we get to where we stopped, it was ‘bustling.’ I... don’t know what that means, but it’s an escalation, growing bigger and growing *faster* the bigger it gets.”

“An escalation to what, is the question.” Harri muttered. “To completion? If it’s in pieces?”

“That would mean *I’m* the piece,” Tabi reminded him. “Which I guess is what it considers me. ‘Fragments of concepts’ and all? Yet it contradicts itself when trying to talk about us. It says it’s making us its own, then says we simply *are* part of it and it doesn’t matter where it ends and we begin. I don’t find that agreeable.”

“It said something similar about us, in the dream Fer had. Said he was a ‘delusion’. Unreal. A fabrication.” Harri scoffed. “Sounds like something *He* would’ve said, from what I knew of Him.”

“Bunch of bullshit, if you ask me,” said a muffled voice.

Tabi startled, looking over her shoulder, to the other half of that room. That half that *was* in darkness. Or at least it was intended to be; the light still illuminated it. It wasn’t as maddeningly covered with stuff, but there still was an impressive amount of boxes under a desk. Of what, she wondered, games? There was a console over there, and smaller boxes, and packages of hair dye unopened.

On the desk itself there was an aquarium with water, plants, sticks and a creature Tabi couldn’t identify. It was a pale pink, with odd bright magenta frills on its head, like tree branches... but not a fish, because it had limbs, too. Small and stubby.

On the opposite side of the yellow bed was another one, this one with a black comforter with a blue trim, a conspicuous lump in its middle. Evidently, someone was trying to sleep. *Was*. Not anymore. The lump stretched and broke free from its self-made prison, and as it peeled back its comforter shell, out from it hatched Ciro. It was somewhat impressive how his hair defied gravity like that.

“It’s past midnight. Some of us are trying to sleep.”

“This can’t wait,” Harri rolled his eyes. “Come over here, we could use a third opinion.”

“Andate a la puta madre que te parió.” Ciro spat. Harri grimaced in a way that had Tabi wishing she’d learned Spanish with Dami... or *from* her, at this point.

“There’s royalty present.”

“Fuck your royalty.” Ah. She didn’t need to be bilingual for that one. “Wait— No, I didn’t mean that.”

“The faster we finish, the sooner you’ll sleep, and we do need a third opinion,” Harri said pragmatically. “But if you want to hear us talk all night…”

Ciro groaned. “*Fine*. Just don’t be *weird* about it.”

With heavy, dragging steps, Ciro joined them, wearing his comforter like a cape. Even to Tabi, who could admit she was not the best at reading people, it was evident he wanted to go back to bed. “Keep going.”

“Thank you,” Tabi nodded to Harri and checked back with her notes. It was harder to share a book between three people than two, but she’d have to make it work. “Another thing, I turned the volume of the game down while I was working— I didn’t want to wake any of the others —” and Tabi winced at Ciro’s tired, unimpressed eyes, “—and I noticed how... *off*, the whole situation felt, without the music in the background. The whole feeling of it changed.”

“Music *is* something important in games.” Ciro looked like he had swallowed a lemon saying that.

“Maybe,” Tabi shrugged, “but it was like I could just... *hear* what the Entity was saying, and how it was saying it, better without the opera in the back. Before, with the music, the situation was *creepy* but not... *awful*.” Tabi couldn’t ever get used to seeing Dami’s limp body held and puppeted like that. The music, in particular, was as pretty as it was inappropriate for the horror she saw onscreen. “But, without... the mood wasn’t set right. It wasn’t set *for* me. I could see and hear for what was there in front of me.”

“And what did you see? What else did it say?” Harri leaned in.

“Here,” Tabi flipped to a specific section of her notes and showed it to Harri. “Look, I charted out some things I was noticing the Ch... Quiet had to say. Asking it what it knew, what work he had left—” she couldn’t quote that one for what it was— “and, here. He keeps trying to apologize. And it doesn’t *let him*.”

“Of course not,” Ciro said, reaching for the book. “He has nothing to apologize *for*.”

“That’s not its reasoning,” Tabi said, turning it to better let him read. “The second visit to that place, he says he’s scared it’ll get worse. From what came next, he *clearly* wasn’t wrong. But it doesn’t actually say anything to help that. It just says that... that Dami and Winnie understand the hurt they’ve been through was ‘a fair price for freedom.’ It calls our pain its ‘texture.’”

“What the fuck?” Ciro muttered under his breath. “What is this about calling Quiet a ‘gate?’”

“‘To them you are a gate to something more’ ... if Quiet is the ‘gate,’” Harri read, “then is ‘something more’ supposed to be Her?”

Tabi... hadn't considered that. She thought, at least, the 'something more' would be the world. The outside. The stars she saw winking out from the stone and soil and rubble of the cabin that came crumbling down around her over the years—the stars she *still* saw, and could see if she went outside. Would a god be so self-centered to take that away from her and claim that *it* was what she was after? To steal her away and call its hold on her 'freedom?'

"I think so," Ciro agreed. "Didn't it say something about you being 'drawn to the edge' of that place? And what's always waiting beyond the cabin? That thing."

"Regardless," Tabi interrupted, feeling... disconcerted, with where the conversation was headed. Dami and Winnie hadn't reacted well when she'd listed out how it described them. Glances were exchanged between them charged with an emotion Tabi hadn't been able to place. But, she was beginning to feel their discomfort, herself. "It doesn't actually address Quiet at all, in there. It addresses us, and it addresses itself, but Quiet was worried about things getting worse, and it offered no reassurances to him about how to cope with that possibility. And then—I hope—Quiet saw the absolute worst the place had to offer."

Tabi heard something go funny with Harri's breathing, for a second. A little too light, shallow. She tapped his shoulder and looked into his eyes. He seemed... fine, she supposed, but that was almost more concerning than if she could see something wrong in his expression.

"That was a shitshow," Ciro said, and Tabi caught a flicker in Harri's expression. Something changed, but she couldn't tell what. It was like he was brought out of something, but she couldn't see anywhere he went. At least he was back.

"Dami didn't let us *Explore* much with it, that last time. Which I'm—conflicted, about. I'm glad she stood up for us and for him. But we need all the information we can get," Tabi explained, taking the book back and patting its cover. "That's the main reason I tried to go back. There were a lot of options there—but Dami picked the important one. That one of them always hurt the other. The Entity didn't really care."

"She said Quiet 'brought her meaning,' what a bitch," Ciro recalled as Tabi handed Harri her notes, trying to keep him engaged. Something about it reminded her a lot of Winnie.

"There's a lot more Quiet could've said, about it," Harri said. "How'd you get all these responses? Why is this one—" he pointed to one that read '*It all seems so distant as soon as I'm near you*' "—circled?"

"I went through as many times as it took. I think the distance Quiet was feeling has something to do with the music," she answered. "Or at least, what the music is supposed to represent in the game. It's significant."

"Out of place." Harri nodded, looking through the rest of the transcribed choices and responses. "The rest of them feel like opinions. Conflicting and contradicting each other. But this is a comment on how Quiet feels in a way the game can't replicate."

"Not sure I follow." Ciro was frowning as though the notes were hieroglyphs.

“See how She agrees? Here,” Harri flipped the notes over so Ciro could see, pointing to the relevant lines. “Look: She says ‘it feels small from here.’ From where?”

“And ‘what’ feels small? In the first one of those things,” Ciro flipped a page a little forcefully, “it talked about th— about Dami like she was talking to it. So it couldn’t have experienced the same things she did. If that makes any sense, my brain’s tired.”

“No, you’re right!” Tabi said, a sudden shock running through her at his observation. A burning sense like a desperate hope. “It says *Dami* asked it to tell Quiet to remember her. And it clearly didn’t want to. It told him he wouldn’t right after, like it was threatened by the insinuation he would care to. Dami was—” *Dami was still alive. We were still alive.*

Like Ava had been alive the whole time. Crushed by the pressure at the bottom of the ocean, drowning and suffocating. *‘Perspectives meld together,’* the second visit. *No. I’m misinterpreting it.*

“It—” She swallowed. “It acts like we weren’t influential to it, but we had to have been.”

Harri scanned the pages. Tabi winced at her handwriting, devolving to scrawling the further she went. “Multitudes... ‘the desires of my multitudes thrive in endless competition with themselves’... it says that word twice, in the third intermission.”

“It says it... *off*, too,” Tabi added, trying to explain tone where the written words couldn’t quite convey it. “It breathes that word, like it means more than just its static definition. It’s really noticeable when the music’s out, how its tone changes.”

“Multitudes of egos, more like.” Ciro said. It was surprising, just how much insulting the Entity with petty lines like that could revoke the power from its presence. Harri had been right, Ciro was sorely needed in this discussion.

“It really started sounding bad around where we stopped. It just doesn’t *talk* like us, like a person does. None of the words are emphasized like they should be. It felt *wrong*.” Tabi’s hands felt cold. She tried to hold Harri’s as nonchalantly as she could. Bad idea, his were freezing. Did he have bad circulation?

“It apologized,” Harri pointed out. “Right here, see? Before we got to the third visit. Said She was ‘sorry for the burdens She placed on him.’”

“But it didn’t apologize about Clara,” Ciro said through clenched teeth. “‘Meaning’ isn’t an apology.”

Harri’s eyes focused on the page, on the many things unknown. Licked his suddenly dry lips. In each section, questions labeled under the heading *‘WHAT DO YOU KNOW?’* In each section, frustratingly vague and cryptic answers. One annotation about calling the Entity out for it, and being told if they didn’t like Its answers, to simply stop asking questions. He stared at that answer as if he wanted to rant against the very thought.

“It did change depending on what Quiet said,” Tabi flipped back to the section aptly titled *‘GUILT’*. “See? It calls him compassionate, too.”

“Even a blind person can see that,” *Ciro* dismissed with a yawn. His jaw locked into position; he indiscreetly manually closed it with his hands. It popped. Once for each joint of the jaw. “Ow— hate when that happens— he’s too compassionate, if you ask me. I wouldn’t have freed *Clara*. Or half the others.”

“No, wait. It— She calls him compassionate when he says he likes *Her*,” *Harri* said, sitting up straight. “Does it comment on him *at all* beyond that?”

“It tells him he’s not a person,” *Tabi* readily slid that detail in. *Dami* *hated* that part of the notebook. She hadn’t known her sister *could* hate! “Calls him ‘familiar’ and says he makes it sad but hopeful.”

“And ‘longing,’” *Harri* caught before *Tabi* progressed. “Not a person, something like *Her*.”

“Mhm. I guess, in the second visit, it lumps him in with itself with that ‘neither of us know the depths to our being.’ It’s more concerned with itself at that point, though. *He* can call *it* kind.” *Tabi* tried to consider another point where the Entity genuinely spoke *to* *Quiet*, as an equal.

...Ah.

“If he tries to kill himself,” *Tabi* said a little too abruptly. *Harri*’s head snapped up to look at her. “It says he has ‘nowhere to be but here,’ with it.”

“What the fuck?!” *Ciro*’s shout was half anger and half horror and wholly unlike *Dami*’s reaction. She’d sat with that line a while, ran her finger over the page as she read it again and again. She seemed to get something from it, found a hidden compassion in the space the Entity gave him and the refusal to let him fall away into nothing.

Tabi didn’t have the heart to tell *Dami* how impatient the Entity got whenever *Tabi* tried to wait in that space. More impatient every time, mentioning how ‘unfinished’ it was and how ‘cavernous’ it and *Quiet*’s existences were sure to be left. How it recited monologues about the futility in trying and the inevitability of his return. How the game closed itself, and how the Entity greeted *Tabi* with exactly how long it’d been waiting, and how it’d never left her side—how *little* the time spent waiting had meant, in the maw of forever. How that inescapable place and the certainty of the Entity’s presence within had felt like a curse.

Quiet’s slow acceptance of that idea, until it was the only choice *Tabi* was presented with by the third visit. ‘There is no waiting forever,’ the text read. Staring down a ‘waiting maw’ in the Entity’s own hands and knowing the exact sequence of events that would unfold if she tried to wait forever anyway. Lost time and missing memories. Closed boxes and woven textures and escaping to imaginary worlds.

It was right. She *would* always come back to the box.

It unnerved her, to put it mildly.

A tap on her shoulder, *Harri* tilting his head when she blinked at him. *Ciro* was still talking. He handed her notebook back to her, in her lap. She had thought hard enough. She wasn’t

even aware for how long Ciro had been ranting.

“It didn’t make sense. It kills him at the end of the intermissions, anyway,” she spoke as if on autopilot. She needed to think about something else. “That’s what the sound of shattering glass means. He can’t do it himself?”

“That’s *so* fucked up,” Ciro breathed, still recovering.

“It says the vessels are ‘creatures of perception,’ that *they* make Quiet forget because he ‘believes’ they’re able to,” Harri answered, reaching over her to flip back to the first intermission. He pointed to the relevant lines, presumably. Tabi was busy marveling, privately, at how neat she’d kept her handwriting at the start of her little project. She marveled, still, that Harri was able to read her later notes, scrawled as they were. Legibility to others wasn’t her main concern half the time, but he was able to read her just fine.

“Like how taking the blade and not taking it results in Dami or Tabi.”

“Please don’t talk about us that way.” It was still disquieting to think that they all ‘formed’ from one ‘person,’ that one choice could alter them so completely, that they had the capacity for that. Tabi hoped her identity, now, was more hard-set.

“Why wouldn’t it want to revisit perspectives it’s already seen?” Harri muttered, more to himself than anyone else. “‘The only paths of value are those that are yet untread.’ But we had so much we could’ve done, with Cl... with Winnie.”

“With Dami too,” Ciro completed. Tabi did not want to remember what Quiet had told them. Or whatever horrifying third option there was. “Maybe it wasn’t distinct enough for her.”

“We couldn’t save Winnie, because She didn’t want us to,” Tabi mused. “And She stopped us from avoiding Clara, even more directly after that. That wasn’t a path we hadn’t walked, it was just a path she hadn’t meant for us to try.”

“Railroading our choices,” Harri muttered. “Influencing us beyond what we agreed to.”

“Is taking no choices an option?” Ciro muttered to himself, eyes half-closed. He shook his head wildly. “No, nope, nevermind. This is the end of the line for me, I really need to sleep.”

He got up, shambling over to his side of the room. He made it halfway across, lingering right on the edge, and suddenly, a single question made itself crystal clear in Tabi’s mind. Something that just *needed* to be asked. A loose end she could pull at right now and see just that much clearer. “Wait,” she called to him, sudden purpose overtaking her as he stopped dead and slowly, slowly, turned his head back to glare at her.

“What is that thing in the tank?”

He came back to consciousness slowly, body sleep-warm. Heavy in a way that made him want to sink back into sleep, were it not for the fact his eyes opened. The room was barely

illuminated by the light seeping in the topmost row of holes in the blinds. Not too early to get up now if he so wished, though he didn't. Not too late to delay the day a few more minutes.

One of his arms was completely numb, trapped under something. He shifted, slightly, noncommittal to the idea of moving but preferring his circulation not be cut off, and found he couldn't move at all, brushing against something heavy and soft. And warm. Like a living thing was warm, like a body was warm. His other arm was wrapped around it on the other side, encompassing it. He almost considered simply pulling it towards him. It would be off his arm that way. And it was warm. It would be warmer closer; he could go back to sleep like that, once the pins and needles wore off. Almost.

Instead, he pushed *himself* closer. He was warmer, like that. He aligned himself better with that something, inhaling as his face came into contact with it. It didn't smell much like a particular anything. Nothing hit him immediately. The mundanity of it was almost relieving, easing into him as he eased into it. Distinctions trickled through him as the layers of it separated, slightly, still of no real substance. Worn fabric, like laundered clothes, and a bit of a sour-tinted scent reminiscent of oil... but there was a sweeter undertone, something subtle and faded. Something about it had him nuzzling into the warm thing, sinking into it, resting comfortably there. He found the fabric smell wasn't particularly strong, either. A chemical scent easy enough to tune out in favor of the sweet-something smell. Something like vanilla, maybe. Barely even there, but the longer he sat in it, the closer it came to him. Eventually, close enough to catch. Cinnamon and sugar, faded with time. Like a cinnamon roll, he decided.

A familiar smell.

His eyes were open but Nando was actually seeing, that time.

His arm being pinned became an immediate problem. Not as immediate as to how damn close he'd snuggled up to a very asleep and very unaware Quiet— *shit, what am I doing*— with no clue how to back up or how he even got into this position. But certainly a problem.

How would he move without waking him? He was holding him far too close. If he *breathed* wrong, it could be disruptive. Good thing he stopped. He was pretty sure his heart wasn't beating, either.

No, it was beating. Far too quickly. He wondered how Quiet's wing hadn't moved away from the vibrations it must surely be feeling. He could feel it in his ears. The wing had tucked slightly under him, at his side. Wouldn't that hurt? Was he hurting him? He would have awoken if so, right?

Like he had read his thoughts, Quiet stirred. He moved just a bit closer, sighing. There was no furrowed brow, no eyes moving frantically behind eyelids. No tension anywhere. Nando could count the times he had seen him like that in one hand.

Something about that...

Nando felt something.

It wasn't something familiar or fantastical.

No 'butterflies', or moths, or wasps, or any sort of insect in his stomach. No 'leap' or heart skipping a beat, no giddiness. Something cut through everything he'd felt, waking up like this, with a pervasive strength. It wasn't a nervousness, or an uncertainty, that ran through him then. Not a feeling. Just the opposite. He just... *knew*.

He just... wanted to be with him, and make him laugh, make that weight behind his eyes lighter. He wanted it to be them against the world again. He never wanted to lie to him. He never wanted to be away from him. Not again.

He just... loved him.

Was that love? Was that being *in* love?

It felt so incredibly mundane. A knowledge that surfaced from the core of his being, rather than a feeling that struck him down in his place. A given. It was a choice he'd made already. Something known and understood implicitly, wordlessly, without need for explanation.

He settled in and held Quiet as if he'd meant to.

This wasn't what he'd pictured it as.

Nando had fantasies.

When every moment of his life was a waking nightmare, Nando did not have much to lean back on beyond fleeting dreams and hopeless desires. It was not uncommon for him, as they lie dying in a pool of their own blood, to learn of and decide on something to want. Something simple. Something easy. Something frustratingly unattainable. To spend just a second longer in those woods, before they went back. To explore the wilderness rather than walk into a beast's den. To find another bird to look at. To find some way out of there. To hear some sympathy for this whole ordeal.

Funnily enough, Nando always got a flicker of each of those things just before Quiet approached that mirror.

It was a habit, built up and forged in the fire of his hatching grounds. A small remnant of a place he never wanted to return to. Even now, when he dreamed, he was running from it still.

To watch Paco make his slow, deliberate way through the cookbook Ave bought for him. To find a puzzle for Harri that he could spend more than an hour with before it was solved. To thank Oli for stepping up and doing what Nando couldn't. To hear Connie crack a joke so terribly disarming that tears of joy might stream down Quiet's face as he laughed. Those were the fantasies that Nando would admit to, if he were ever asked. To learn every type of bird there ever was on this earth, to build a nest of blankets and pillows so soft he'd sink into it and be engulfed by the world's sweetest sleep, to write a book on par with the ones he read in his own time when the others were either too busy or too much... those were the ones he'd try and keep to himself.

And one *other* fantasy. One selfish thought.

Nando scarcely wanted to admit it to himself. But when it was dark, and he was alone, and he did not feel the right to move and interrupt anyone else's sleep... he had just one more fantasy.

He would hold him, in his arms. Gently. He'd hold him. Arms wrapped around his back, and his arms around him, close and soft and sweet. He'd hold him, like that, and feel the way he relaxed into his arms and the slowing of his breath. Falling asleep in his arms.

...But that wasn't enough. Nando imagined himself, selfishly, moving in that cuddle. Raising his face to his, taking in this soft expression in their grey eyes he sometimes saw in not dissimilar situations, and pulling him closer. Placing his lips on his head, gently, holding for a time whose appropriateness could only be timed in the beating of his heart. A soft, gentle, *quiet* kiss, just for him, just from him, in the dead of night where only those two would ever know.

And.

And.

He'd keep going, like that, he thought. He wouldn't be able to stop if he reacted well. Another kiss. Another. Each one letting him know he was safe, he was wanted, he was loved. Kisses, kisses, kisses.

Telling him, in the negative space between each one, in whispers and murmurs, everything he wanted to hear. No. More selfish. Everything he wanted to say. Everything he wanted to make him feel, and being the one to make him feel that way. To impart on him, for just one moment with each little shock to his head and each little word in his name, the softness in his heart when he'd hear him laugh.

It felt so, so, so selfish. The least attainable fantasy he ever had. But he still wanted it, maybe, anyway.

Running wasn't something Ave thought he would actually enjoy. As something to do for survival, yes, always, he couldn't stop, but for fun? Until he had properly met Gonchi, that was just a pipe dream. But then Gonchi *did* see Ave run— *away*, from the others, too loud and overwhelming and rooms too small and shadows too dark to see movement in— and he hadn't let up his insistence on 'training' with him ever since.

He'd asked to train before. It wasn't new. Gonchi tended to ask a lot of people about training at least once. Usually this included fighting. Sometimes, for the weaker ones, he'd asked about smaller things—the kinds of training everyone else considered, muscle building and aerobics and workout schedules. But Gonchi asked Ave to spar once or twice before, and he'd declined. But a run? That sounded doable. He could run. It was what he was made for, it was what he was supposed to do.

The sparring, then, became a trust exercise. But the running was Ave's favorite. Not just because he had been relieved he could run long distances even with his back mangled, but for the fact that he could outrun Gonchi easily. It made him less nervous. He hadn't been too slow that time, she had just been really fast.

With Gonchi, *he* was the really fast one. And he was only getting faster.

Now that his wound was healed, however... he was the *fastest*. No burdens, no pains, just purely calculated speed. He was a machine of motion, of movement, riding on the winds at his feet. He'd never felt quite as alive as when he ran, and this was the most alive he'd ever felt. Alive and free.

Gonchi could not keep up, so Ave kept up for him. If he ran fast enough, he could simply 'catch up' to him as if he were the one lagging behind.

Even if Gonchi ran with less enthusiasm than usual, that morning. Like there was something else he'd rather be doing. There weren't many options, truly. He had even expected him and Ava to end that way.

What still surprised him was everything else. Everything he had learned, everything that he knew now. What he had thought and what was actually happening. The ones that had taken refuge from the rain in their nest — they were more like his flock than what he'd thought, even if the one who looked like *her* had fangs and claws.

Borja and his sickness, trying to drag a member of his flock into the jaws of a waiting predator. No, not a sickness. Not really, not quite. There was something deliberate in his every action, in his words.

Felipe. Ave had misjudged him so, so badly. How he had never taken into account how rabid his needs ran? Needs, a hunger like desire and a thirst like desperation, that compelled him even in the dark and the stillness, that pulsed along with his blood and echoed in his every breath. A need, potentially insatiable, and the longer he starved the more ravenous, the more volatile he would become. It was the simplest quality of nature and Ave *missed* it. How?

They had been living alongside the others with them none the wiser.

He had never thought, either, to think about one of the girls as needing protection, not really. The dynamic of predator and prey flipped, wrong, taking each other's shapes and living among the opposite of their ilk. Her instincts needed sharpening. Young and growing and without proper experience to draw intuition from, Dami was vulnerable. A fledgling needing to be taken under another's wing.

But as the saying went, *con hambre no se puede pensar*. He needed sustenance or his thoughts would turn anxious and worse.

And that was what he was doing. Yes, they had woken up later than usual, but Paco had gone grocery shopping. And Ave was taking advantage of that to the fullest. He felt hungrier than he had in a long time, and eating his weight in bizcochos didn't seem like such a bad idea

when he was seven in, even if he knew his stomach would protest severely if he kept up the pace.

“Breathe,” Oli’s voice very nearly made him choke. “Leave some for the rest of us.”

Ave didn’t feel particularly inclined to do either of those things. He took the slightest of breaks in-between bites to glance up and glare at Oli for his terrible life advice— there was something between disgust and awe in his expression —and then tried his best to eat faster.

At least he didn’t try to take the food from him again. His stomach was starting to resemble a rock, though. Maybe he had a point.

A shrill noise sounded out from the front of the house, high-pitched and ringing. Ave really did choke, then, body jolting as he looked up to see Oleander frozen in place, shock all but present in his posture though convincingly missing from his face.

Doorbells weren’t supposed to incite panic.

Both jumped from their seats. It couldn’t be someone already welcome— they would have opened the door, not asked to be let in— but there was not a single person Ave thought fit to be welcomed back inside. Not a single member of the flock gone from the house that he knew of, beyond the ones not welcome, beyond the ones exiled. The strays were either asleep or accounted for. The rest were predators, not welcome.

Oli was already moving back towards the rooms. Ave stood guard, watching the shadows in the crack beneath the door. A shadow behind a curtain.

Could they just not open the door? Would they leave?

Knocking on a door— from behind, not in the front. Must be where the strays were, must be warning them. Ave imagined preparations to run. To where, uncertain. Hiding would be best. The knocking was less rhythmic than Ave would assign to Oli, more curt. Then, a voice that was not Oli’s. A voice that was dull and monotone with an undercurrent of ill-placed excitement.

“He’s here for you,” Cain said.

Oleander’s voice followed, with proper warnings, proper urgency. Too-casual footsteps from the back of the house to the front, Cain brushing past Ave and— *no!*— briskly opening the door to a large frame.

A slight relief. The tension in Ave’s shoulders, arms, legs, dropped along with Cain’s. The lesser of two evils. “Oh,” Cain greeted, his tone dripping with boredom. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to come in,” Borja moreso stated than requested. Cain, hand still on the door’s edge, started to close it. “No— wait!”

Just before Cain stunned Ave by doing the right thing and slamming the door on Borja’s face, a hand pushed the door back open. Borja wouldn’t do something like that. Tension ran

through Ave's frame like lightning once again.

"You withering fiend," Felipe started, pushing Borja aside and the door open with his full weight. Cain did not move except to look down on him, even as he moved into Cain's personal space, trying to loom despite the height difference. "Borja has as much right to get inside as you."

"Does he?" Cain moved to close the door a little and Felipe kept it open. He tilted his head, glancing briefly to see the tension in Felipe's frame, standing to his full height. Still not enough to look down on Cain, or even eye to eye.

"Yes, more than," and Ave would agree if only Felipe didn't continue speaking, "after what you lot did. Let us in, and do it now, or mark my words, you won't like what will happen."

"Oh? And what will happen?" There was something like a smile in Cain's tone. "What do you think you're capable of?"

It would be too much to ask that they came to blows right by the door so he could push them both out. So they could kill each other without risking his flock in the crossfire.

"I'm not letting Borja in," Cain stated plainly. Ave felt something jolt through his entire body. No, him and Oleander went the wrong ways. He needed to teach Dami how to hide—he needed to find Quiet and hide *him*, too. Oli couldn't hide, not like Ave knew how to, he wouldn't do it right. He hid with words. He could stop this.

He grasped his thread with a shaky hand as he kept listening. Maybe he couldn't get to Quiet now, but he could make him aware that he had to keep still.

"What reason could you possibly have to not let him in?" Felipe said, tone dry and shaking. Dangerous.

Cain did not respond for a moment. It seemed a deliberate silence; the quiet plucking of strings until a load-bearing rope unraveled, until Felipe snapped like he and Ave both knew he would. Why would he endanger everyone like that?

"You egg, do you not have any reason at all for the harm you inflict? Are you so callous you cannot even dignify your disgrace of common courtesies a purpose?" Felipe ranted, taking a sharp breath as if meaning to continue his tirade.

"Borja serves no value here," Cain answered as if Felipe hadn't started speaking at all. "No value except his exile. That was exciting to watch."

"He's not worth it," Borja interjected quickly.

"*Things* don't speak unless spoken to. And if you're so insistent on being property, there's no need to see you as a guest," Cain said immediately without so much as glancing Borja's way, cadence just a little faster, almost *animated*. He took a short breath before continuing, returning to normal. "But if you'd like to leave your baggage outside and come in, you may

do whatever it is you came here for on its behalf. But please do get rid of it soon. It's terribly impolite to leave garbage lying around."

Felipe choked on his own anger. "You dare-?!"

"You know me better than that at this point. Yes, I dare." As if to emphasize the statement, Cain took a single step forward.

"*Borja* is here to collect *his* belongings," Felipe said, straightening his posture in response to Cain's approach. No matter how far he stretched or how he held himself, he was still the shorter of the two. "He's clearly not welcome in this foul place any longer, and I will not stand for it!"

"That's correct," Cain said.

"And!" Felipe said as if to interrupt Cain. "There are some words in need of exchanging with the head of the house."

"Oh?" Cain tilted his head dangerously. "And what could those be?"

Ave blinked, remembering himself. His heart wanted to burst out of his chest. Cain wanting to talk? Since when? The culebra of the nest would do so much better at this...

"I don't have to answer to you." Felipe tilted his chin up.

"I'll hear it whether you intend me to or not. Unless," a heartbeat, loud in Ave's ears, "you intend to stop me."

Wrong thing to say.

Ave curled into himself as Felipe tried to push past Cain, getting ready to pounce once more, only he never got the chance.

Ave couldn't see, at first, what had happened, but the floor vibrated with the felling of a giant. He tilted his head to get a better angle. Borja, frozen in shock and several steps back from the door; Cain, his hands interlaced with Felipe's, pushing his hands back way past the point it was safe; and Felipe on his knees on the floor, teeth clenched and pale with pain.

"That was pathetic," Cain said easily, leaning over Felipe. "A shame. I thought this would be more interesting. I thought you had something new to show me."

Felipe didn't answer, exhaling harshly instead. Ave had a notion of what he wanted to say, and none of them were good things. Cain pushed Felipe's fingers back a little farther as if passively testing their limits.

"You know your Princess is here, right?" Cain mocked, reaching to grab Felipe's face and tilt it to look him in the eye again. Felipe was trembling. Ave couldn't tell from what. Pain? Fear? Anger, still? Cain's posture showed nothing, looming over him. Nothing but pride. "She knows how weak you are now. All those emotions running through you are so

impractical, aren't they? You see? It's just as I said. She needed *me* all along. She's been done a good turn, staying here instead. Staying away from you."

Between one heartbeat and the next, Ave felt like his blood was boiling over. Evaporating. Like his vision was swimming, blurry at the edges. Something darkened in the shadow Cain cast onto Felipe, encompassing and pulsing over him, the shadows of the room deepening. Too dark to see. A monster was inside them, but he could not hear its chains rattling on the basement floor anymore. He saw someone else walking in.

"What are you two *doing*?" Oli said, his tone chipper and his pace brisk. He tapped Ave on the shoulder as he passed him, tilting his head towards the rooms he came from, then turned back to the pair. The bristling of the darkness paused as Felipe's eyes snapped up to Oleander, startled.

Ave took a step back, still watching as Oli pulled the two apart—he saw the way his hands tensed at prolonged contact with Cain—and put himself between them, smiling with sharp teeth. His shoulders were tense as was his jaw; Ave, if he were less aware, might've mistaken it for the same nervousness he felt, but he saw the wild glint in those eyes. The sharp way he turned Cain around and instructed him to "go ahead and make these guys' lives a little easier and gather their things for them, yeah? It's bad manners to have them do all the work themselves," and the practiced way he grinned at Felipe as he pulled him up to his feet.

All that to say, *move away, this one's mine*. Another sort of predator. Opportunistic. Cain did not kill Felipe, but his inflicted wounds made him an easier catch. As much as those two hated each other, they shared some similarities.

"Now, my friend, what happened there to get you like that? You know Cain would say anything to get a rise out of you, I've told you that a hundred times," he spoke as he slung his arm around the man's shoulder, patting it as if to encourage him to relinquish his stresses, and Ave slinked away to find the ones in need of hiding. And Paco, who, knowing him, would be halfway to a panic attack.

The first door he tried was locked, but the scent was unmistakable.

(Intention) It's me, open up.

On the other side, something heavy was being lifted, pushed maybe, out from the front of the door. He could hear it dragging across the floor. And then a lock clicked, the door opening just barely.

"Whew, it's just you. Come on," Nando greeted, opening the door the rest of the way and ushering Ave inside. He didn't fail to notice Nando was clutching a jagged wooden board, a piece of the flooring of his room torn up. It was no claw, but it was better than nothing.

The closet door was open. Just a crack. Enough to see the blackness inside.

The barricade constructed here wouldn't help against the shadows. They needed to hide better than that. A burrow was the first place a predator would check looking for an easy meal.

Ave glanced around the room, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. *In the closet.* He stepped towards it, feet light on the ground and breathing lighter. The fear-scent was palpable; that was good. Predators were not afraid, not in the way prey was, just desperate and eager. He checked at his back, Nando watching him approach the closet warily. “Whose idea was it to shroud Quiet in the shadows that could claw into his flesh at any moment?”

Nando went a shade of white visible even in the low light. Swayed a little. “I thought... I *thought*...”

“No time to think,” Ave jumped, opening the closet wide and letting the light of the room rush in. Quiet flinched, whether it be from the change in lighting or Ave’s appearance, but those reflexes were good—he needed to stay ready like that. “Get out. It’s cramped. You have no escape routes there, we’ll find someplace better.”

“Where?” Nando said in a whisper. Good too. They had no way of knowing if he could hear.

Quiet still hadn’t moved.

(Fear) (Trapped) Stuck.

No. Move. Now.

Quiet stumbled out of the closet as if he were pulled, tripping onto his hands and knees. His wings were folded tight against his back, pinned so as to be smaller, to draw less attention, but feathers ruffled all the same. His breathing was shallow as if he’d been stuck in a cave-in, not a closet. Not good. Had to keep moving. Ave turned to Nando, though he kept his ears pricked for noise from the front of the house and eyes sharp, flicking to the corners several times. “Need to get the others. Hide as a pack. Thinned out, he can pick us off; together, if he finds us, we can all attack.”

Nando’s eyes narrowed as he nodded. If he tightened his grip on the board any harder he’d get splinters. Quiet rose on shaky limbs; Nando kept close to him, grabbed his hand. “Still with me?” Quiet nodded in lieu of words, taking deeper breaths. Good. He shouldn’t give Felipe a single sound.

Ave paused.

(Realization) How does he feel?

(Constriction) (Remorse) He hates me.

(Frustration) (Correction) How close is he?

(Recognition) (Rage) (Anger) (Notmine) Too.

“We must move quickly.” It would be so much less nerve wracking if he could communicate with Nando wordlessly.

Three pairs of feet slinking through the halls, two of them not as nimble as him. The next door led to no one. The next didn’t either, and creaked slightly as it opened. Every missed

judgement would give away their location a little more. Oleander was talking; that Ave could pick up. He hoped the sound of his speech covered up the sound of their movements.

It was a little impressive how much he liked to talk. He wondered if the others could hear it as well. Straining his hearing, he could make out everything he was saying.

“I think we’ve had a little miscommunication somewhere along the way, here! This *really* is *so much simpler* than you think it is. Are you sure you haven’t been spending too much time around Harri?... Why, yes, he changed his name! Wow, you really *are* out of the loop. This chat with me was *sorely* needed. Skeptic, you know him... Well, there’s been a few happenings around, but that’s how things are, you know, when you aren’t around things still happen! But— yes, yes, excuse me... You’re being a bit silly, friend. This isn’t some grand conspiracy! It’s simple, you know. There was just a little difference in the power vertical that caused some tense negotiations, and, well, you know how these types get, and...”

He was and-ing too much, they had to be quicker.

Ave passed by Borja’s room in a hurry, glancing minutely to see Cain genuinely working to gather Borja’s things. He moved aimlessly, picking up items at random, assessing them with something between disinterest and distaste in his expression before indiscriminately dumping everything in a trash bag he dragged on the ground like dead weight. If he was so bored then why was he dragging it out? Did he want to see bloodshed after all? Was he going to do something after Felipe attacked? Taking too long, taking too long. Oli was stalling but that was the key; that was how to get the intruders to leave. Ave ducked his head low and progressed.

There was talking behind the third door. Not feminine, and not Paco, but— Ave blinked as he remembered, this was Harri and Ciro’s room. And Ciro was talking about as hushed as he was hurried, which was impressive in its self-control, but Ave heard Harri say “I can talk to him” and locked in place. He glanced back towards Nando, uncertain of the potential dynamics there. Harri *could* talk. Could he talk to *Felipe*?

Nando slowly, slowly, shook his head. Quiet did, too. The chattering on the other side of the door seemed to agree. Ave clicked open the door— too loud to his ears, too noticeable— and watched as Harri stood from where he sat on his bed and Ciro whirled around. The latter relaxed minutely as he recognized him.

“Don’t bother,” Nando said quietly, shaking his head. “Even when he was acting normal, he wasn’t one to engage with ‘empiricists’ who think the world runs on logic.”

“What *else* could it—?”

“You’re better off finding Borja’s belongings and handing them off,” Ave instructed, pushing his way in and sending Harri off in the right direction. “You can better discern what he’s here for than Cain can. Make it quick.”

Ciro looked between Nando, Ave, and Quiet with some uncertainty. “What the hell are you doing leading Quiet around for? You do realize there’s a timebomb nearby? If he finds him he’ll kill him.”

“Finding the others. Need to hide.” Ave glanced around the room. Visual noise everywhere, too many shadows from too many shelves. Only one door, doubling as both exit and entry point. Bad place. He stared back at Ciro. “Seen Paco anywhere?”

“Shit. No, hadn’t even thought about how he’d take this.”

Ave glanced back towards Quiet. *Delegate and prioritize*. “I’ll get him somewhere safe. You find Paco, calm him down. He’s not any sort of mark. Find the others, too, think of something.”

Ciro nodded and the room went empty.

Finally, at the fourth door, the right someone answered the knock. Tabitha ushered them all inside, pale-faced. Winnie’s pupils had become slits, the plants on her progressing from flowers to actual brambles. Good, a natural defense mechanism. Both of them had steel claws in hand. Even better.

He couldn’t see Dami. Hiding too? He stalked a quick circle around the room before stopping short and peeking under the bed. A juvenile instinct, but accurate nonetheless, given the pair of massive eyes gazing back at him. How had he never seen her as prey like him? Why else would she have those eyes? She looked terrified.

Did nobody think of what hiding in shadows could mean? Then again, hiding in an open space where the sun was shining wasn’t hiding. But this room was almost perfectly empty. No dark, secret places for a monster to crawl out of. All *but* the bed.

To Dami’s credit, she didn’t utter a sound when he yanked her out, just rubbing her wrist, hunching into herself. Winnie looked like she wanted to say something.

“Hiding in the shadows isn’t an option,” he hissed.

“You could stand to have slightly more *tact*, you nasty thing,” Winnie hissed back. Her posture mirrored his own, he realized. Hunched and light-footed, standing on the tips of her toes. If he had a tail it might be whipping back and forth not too dissimilarly.

“Be ready to use your fangs as much as your steel claw,” Ave said softly, resolutely. She seemed taken aback by the switch-up, switching her grip and glancing down at her weapon, jaw setting. She plastered herself right besides the door, claw at the ready.

In stark contrast, Tabi was sat at the end of the room. He blinked at her, at the blade in her hands. “I can use it just fine, you know. So what’s the plan?”

Plan? There was no plan. Hide until the danger passes, that was the plan. Why was everyone so concerned with thinking?! That was what the others were for!

“Well?”

Ave shushed her. He needed to hear.

“...how would they even know where we live?” He caught the tail end of Oli’s response, muffled through the walls. He also caught, through his unfocused sight, Tabi tilting her head as if listening, too. “Friend, now, now, *friend*. Let’s not get hasty. Grace, put that down, you’re not a poltergeist, you’re besmirching the good name of ectoplasmic being everywhere. Here,” Oli’s voice raised in volume, “come with me into the *kitchen* a moment! We don’t need to linger by the door like this!” His attempts to warn the others of his movements were pitifully noticeable, as was his return to speaking volume. “You know you’re wel— you know we’re friends! We have to get your head on straight...”

Ave took back everything he thought about the snake. And he meant *everything*. Going through the window was too risky— what if Borja was watching the door after all? That line of thinking sounded like Paco. Still, he caught heartbeats speeding up painfully. One of which was his own.

Only for them to skip a beat at the same time as Ciro appeared with a loud ‘poof!’, Paco in tow. Quiet immediately knelt down to his level, sitting on the floor with him and breathing. Ciro made to turn to Nando, but he did a short double-take at the two armed girls in the room. He froze up, his breathing going ragged in an instant. Tabi stared at him in a way that was distinctly unhelpful.

“No, I haven’t been—! Brainwashed? *Me?* Who do you think I am, my friend, I don’t fall for things like that!” Oli kept at it.

From his peripheral, Ave saw Quiet thrumming— one could say the air, he knew it to be a thread. What they were saying, Ave didn’t know, but it managed to make Ciro avert his gaze from them. He leaned towards Nando, and the latter held his shoulders as he whispered something. Something about “backup,” something about Gonchi and Ava. Listening in for two places at once was hard.

“Listen, listen, *listen* to me.” Especially when one place was demanding his attention. “Quiet’s not here right now, and I don’t know when he’ll be back. But, how about we strike a fair compromise beneficial to *all* parties, and everyone walks away happy, alright?”

Quiet stood, panicked, wings spreading as if moving independent of him, feathers spread wide and ruffled. His wings honored a wholly subconscious desire to be larger than he was, to assert strength and authority, to scare off the threat. He keened silently, a plea to stop. But he could not stop the smooth-talker.

“You see— ah, thank you, you two, just leave that by the door and our friends can collect it once they leave— you see, there’s a whole lot of light yet to be shed on this whole situation, right? And we both know from poor old Borja how doing things the hard way gets you. The hard way is the *bad* way. And you know, a wise fellow once told us, ‘who needs violence when you have love on your side?’ And your side? That’s the winning side. I’ll wager that if you just give good ol’ Quiet some time with that *game* we’ve been looking at—”

Tabi flinched back, rising from her comfortable position at the room’s end towards the door, stopping in place, pacing the floor. Quiet’s wings trembled in his fear in the way that a tree’s leaves would in heavy wind.

“What? What is he saying?” Nando whisper-hissed, grabbing Ave by the shoulders.

“—things will turn out right as rain in *no time at all!* We can all be made *better* by watching it, right? That’s another quote by that wise fellow, by the way. And that wise fellow is you.”

Ave had forgotten how weak Felipe was to flattery. Ave had forgotten how he hated Oleander’s compromises.

“Don’t you worry one bit. You’re a *visionary*. And we’ll all end up seeing the light one way or the other, won’t we?... Ah, but I’ve taken up so much time! Here, go on, go on, guide our mutual friend to his new homestead, tell him well wishes from me. And,” there was a pause. Ave imagined a handshake, maybe, in that time. Something to seal the dark pact that none of them consented to. “Do come back to us sometime soon?”

Quiet’s wings dropped, his entire being seeming to sag. Nando had to catch him before he fell. In his eyes there was a desperate, doomed expression.

A sudden cold spell and mist appearing from nowhere marked the appearance of the enigma that was the ghost. She glanced around the room, taking in each of them.

“Grace, what happened? What did they say?” Nando practically begged. Grace’s lip trembled. As if she didn’t know what to say. As if there was nothing to say. As if everything that could’ve been said was already spoken.

Too late to make any other decision. It was already made for them.

Chapter End Notes

Overthinker: this chapter ended up with much more fluff than we expected to write in. everyone's had a moment to breathe. how dull! good thing things ramped up and we settled into some plot progression at the end there, huh? ;P

friendly reminder that this fic has [a discord server](#), where i can lie to you for fun!... and other such Petrified-related activities.

Dua: ...bueno, les mentimos. No me arrepiento. JAJAJAJA!

Chapter 16: El astrónomo que no podía ver el cielo

Chapter Summary

From a bombshell, the fallout is freed. A house of horrors returns with realizations beyond comprehension. Flesh splits open and cosmos unravel.

Chapter Notes

Broken - Borja
Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi
Cold - Caín
Contrarian - Connie
Hunted - Avellano/Ave
Opportunist - Oleander/Oli
Paranoid - Paco
Cheated - Ciro
Hero - Fernando/Nando
Smitten - Felipe/Feli
Skeptic - Harrier
Prisoner - Tabi/Tabitha
Damsel - Dami/Damiana
Witch - Winnie/Winifred
Tower - Thelka
Adversary - Ava
Nightmare - Clara
Spectre - Grace
Stranger - Plethora

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The door was closed.

It would remain that way for some time.

The sound of the latch clicking into place in its mechanisms was going to be the second sweetest sound Oleander ever heard, only beaten by the glory of when he rushed over to click the lock. But first: down the halls, he heard *another* door open, and the loud sound of footsteps slamming against the floor in their rush to reach him. He braced himself, turning around just in time to catch Tabi on a full-course sprint to slam into him, a knife aimed for his throat— *what*—?

He was pushed against the wall before he could even think to gasp, or speak, or hold his hands up in defense. A knife at his throat. He didn't think Tabitha of all people would be the one to do this, but that was fine, she'd listen to reason better than the alternative. It was just one more hostage situation he'd have to negotiate. But this time he was the hostage. This was fine. This was *fine*.

Right now, she was shouting at him, so he listened. "You seriously set us up to go *back* to that place after all we told you?!"

He leaned back as much as he could, given the circumstances. The sting of metal against his skin was less than preferable, really, but he wouldn't be rude about it. Her voice was also loud, maybe a tad too much, but he could work that out with her later, too. She was waiting on an explanation? *That* he could give. "Don't worry, I have a plan—"

"If anything happens to my sister while she's there I will hold *you* responsible!" Tabi yelled anyway.

"Who said she'd have to go?" He reasoned, trying to put more distance between them. He usually liked having his back to a wall like this. It usually kept him out of danger. Not now! Just meant he could only trust himself, right? Not walls, *certainly* not people. None of the others were saying anything to defend him.

Tabi edged back, just a little. He could inhale without worrying about the expansion of his throat being the thing to kill him, now. Incremental progress! Her eyes narrowed. "What's your game? What are you playing at?"

Oli took a shallow breath. Can't trust his judgement too much when lives are on the line, after all. "You see—"

"You *told them* we'd come back, you think they'll just *forget*?" Tabi retracted the knife from his neck, along with her looming posture over him, to glare at him coldly. He did his best to incrementally push himself off the wall, testing the woman's trust in his newfound mobility.

"Maybe! But they're only after *Quiet*, right? So— so if you think it'd be best, then..." Oli stalled. Tabi looked angrier. He rose his hands up, hoping to placate her, ignoring how they shook. "Alright, alright, bad choice of—"

"You're just *letting them have him*?" Tabi asked, gesticulating in some sort of direction with the knife. Pointing to something? Like he'd fall for *that* old trick. "Do you have any idea what all that panic was for? You can't make that decision for everyone, not without even considering us, not without a discussion!"

There was a lot Oli could say to that. A lot of good responses, good cards hidden somewhere up his sleeves. But he'd been talking so long— and she was waving that knife around far too wildly— and he was afraid— and he just couldn't—

"If I hadn't done that, Quiet would have died and we would have felt it happen!" He snapped, pushing himself off the wall, the momentum pushing him to stand face-to-face with Tabitha. He shouldn't have let that last thing slip, he knew it, any hint of information would be

snapped up by this one. He just couldn't stop himself. His legs felt wobbly. His words felt light, thin, like he was projecting his voice wrong. He spoke louder. "If Felipe got his hands on Damiana, she would have died too! Not in the literal sense but she would! He was about to do something, you lot didn't see him, he had claws! I had to do..."

He remembered things: he remembered being mauled by a woman like a cornered animal and bleeding out from the flesh wounds, he remembered being sent down a flight of stairs and his paralyzed body waiting for the maggots to come and pick his corpse clean of its flesh, he remembered the weakness of his flesh and the desperate bids he made for the power to rectify it. He remembered nightmares of being crushed to death by roots in what had to be the universe conspiring against him. Nobody deserved that kind of slow death, and if what Quiet had told them was any indication, having his chest *torn open* was even worse. He couldn't let that happen.

He couldn't let that happen, but there were only a few options presented in front of him. One of them was inconceivable and one of them was impossible. There were a dozen others that might've been but for one reason or another just weren't. One of them would've led to certain death and one of them might've been survivable. He'd tried, he'd tried, he'd *tried* not to choose either, but he just—

"I had to do something!" He cried, and it wasn't a convincing enough statement and he knew that, he knew he was doing a bad job. He knew he wasn't cut out for leadership. He didn't know how Quiet was.

"You couldn't think of anything *else* to do?"

From behind Tabitha's glare, he could see the others beginning to fill the room. Even behind the closed door, he knew Quiet wasn't angry, and wasn't that madness? Afraid, yes, he breathed it in like stale air, but mad? No.

He'd said he was *proud* of him...

"You didn't see what I saw," Oli said, trying to gesture with shaking hands. Trying to make any of this alright, lie and pretend it was alright. "He wasn't going to leave. He wouldn't listen to me, I tried to explain our side of things and he just wouldn't hear it. He already made up his mind."

He thought it was Borja. He thought if he just stole him away and set things straight, at the very least, he could see the truth if not reason. He thought, when all the cards were laid on the table, the truth would be self-evident. He thought wrong. He thought the pain Quiet went through was unforgivable, but Felipe thought it hadn't been enough.

And he'd let him into the kitchen.

"He was going to stay there until he saw Quiet and for every second he didn't it was like he was getting angrier with— with *everything*. And he was *tall*. And dark. And the room was— was darker, the shadows creeping in and cutting out all the air, and they kept closing in like it would be just me and him and he'd suffocate me the second he had me alone. And then it'd

be over. And he'd come for you all next. And the timer was ticking but I *couldn't* —" his voice cracked, "—defuse the bomb, I just had to throw it out the window."

A knock on the door very nearly made him jump. No, not a knock on a door, a knock on *his* door. Something slipped through the crack, despite his best efforts, a notecard in the empty space of the door and the ground.

(Guilt) (Recognition) Don't blame yourself.

He carefully folded it up without examining it. He didn't want to read it, even if that was silly; he already had. That wasn't how this whole thing worked, not really. The words weren't really words, they were impressions on the soul that took the form without the function. There was no room for manipulation or misunderstanding, there; it was why he refused to use it unless absolutely necessary. What was the point of communication you couldn't hide in? That was the *opposite* of what he did. He just wanted to pretend it hadn't been heard. He didn't like being lied to. Even if Quiet was lying to himself, too, so it didn't quite register. He clicked his door closed a little further.

Well. He didn't need to blame himself if he could shift the blame onto others, did he? And it wasn't like the others that had been there with him had helped one iota!

"He's right," Oli's heart gave a leap as he heard Grace's voice. "I was with him. Felipe *was* changing. He never really fully got over what Cain told him; the shadow he cast lingered through the whole visit."

And *oh*, wasn't that right? Wasn't that *rich*? Oli looked for Cain in the crowd, only to turn and see him standing off to the side, near the front door with Harri, a little closer to Oli than he'd been expecting. He hated how silently he moved almost as much as he hated the disaffected look on his flat face. "You *really* weren't helping with the whole 'keep the giant shadow beast from going on a rage-induced rampage' plan, you know? We were all on the same page!"

"What did he do?" Connie asked with interest. Oh, look, another one he had no idea where he'd come from!

"What did *you* do?" Oli spat, a little beside himself. Connie flinched back. No, he couldn't turn the others on someone if he was just going to take it like that. He reeled himself in before he made things worse for himself; took a short breath that didn't really do much of anything, but he was hoping the others saw as him getting his shit together. Confidence was all about lying to people. "I'm— Cain wasn't helping, that's for sure. First thing I came into him doing was mocking and belittling the man we all heard was capable of transforming into an unkillable shadow beast after being half-told a semi-disinterested 'yes' to a suggestion he made. It was like he was *trying* to intentionally piss him off!"

"I was," Cain admitted. Harri nodded beside him, shuffling a single step away.

"He was," Ave said at the same time.

"What?" Oli couldn't tell who said that one.

“Emotions are predictable,” Cain said.

“I’m pretty sure they’re actually the exact opposite,” Paco argued.

“Only if you give into your own.” Cain shrugged. “He was easy to subdue when I had him where I wanted him. And even if he tried to pull his little trick with me, he couldn’t have done anything unless I let him.”

“He was *definitely* going to do something,” Nando said.

“He was going to try.” Cain’s inflection turned up. He surveyed the small crowd that had poured out into the room, apparently not inclined to elaborate further. That was a familiar move. Oli knew a thing or two about staying silent to pretend you had something you weren’t saying, when really you had nothing to say at all.

“And your recklessness would’ve gotten us killed,” Ave said, bristling as he shoved past those in the front. “You were playing with your food before you had even managed to snap its neck in your jaws, and in that time it’d unsheathed its claws and prepared to maim you.”

“Can you just *say* what he was doing, actually?” Connie interrupted.

“He could’ve tossed Felipe out of the nest,” Ave simplified, his tone a bit curt. “Instead, he preened and flattered himself with how he’d stolen Dami away for himself.”

“Excuse me?” Tabi cut in, and Oli backed up and away. She brandished her knife, luckily this time at Cain, with a little added flourish. His eyes tracked the movement to an unsettling degree.

Not scared, curious.

“Yeah, um,” Dami spoke up, raising her hand from the back of the crowd. They parted on either side of her. Quiet was standing behind her, Oli noticed, about as far back from everyone else as he could get without having not followed their lead and entered the room at all. Dami flustered under the increased attention, wringing her hands together. “I don’t appreciate that very much.”

Cain stared through her a moment. “My apologies.” *Huh?* “It was an effective motivator.”

Harri tried to pick his jaw off the floor.

“Can you...” Dami took a short breath. “...stop doing that?”

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“Talking about me, like that,” Dami said, her softspoken voice turning into more of a mumble. She perked up. “And being mean to the others. It’s rude!”

Cain tilted his head at her. “It is rather impolite. If you insist.”

Dami stalled a moment. “Really?” No response. “I— I do insist! Please stop being rude to people for no reason.”

Oli hid his grimace well. He’d caught the loophole. Cain was certain he’d had a reason to do what he did to Felipe, and that was for entertainment. That was most of the reasons he did anything, Oli thought.

“And treating Dami like something to be *kept*,” Tabi interjected, reminding him. “She’s a person, not a trophy, and you don’t even know her. Treat her with some respect, it’s the least you can do.”

“Yeah,” Dami said, and her sister nodded at her to continue. Those two... “I don’t like it. And I don’t know you. So... stop.”

Cain nodded very, very slightly. “That’s fine. The act was getting dull, anyway.” A short pause. “I’ll be cordial to you in the future.”

...That was not how Oli had wanted that conversation to go.

“Antagonizing Borja wasn’t a good idea from the start,” Ave started again, and Oli would have to revisit his placement in his ranking for sure. They had the same objective.

Harri sighed very, very tiredly. “It really wasn’t a good idea near the end, either.”

Connie nodded to himself. Oli wondered why he looked vindicated. Was it better to do nothing at all than to do something that made things worse? ...In this case yes, probably.

He did a headcount. Someone was missing. Two someones. Three. He wasn’t necessarily shocked to see that Quiet’s disappearance coincided with Fernando’s, those two tended to pair up in a crisis and he knew as much, but the ghost’s disappearance was a more troubling development. Grace was his backup here. Did she follow them off to whatever corner they snuck off to? If so, he’d have to have words with her.

...Well. Was that how Quiet felt that one time? Wow.

Should he look for them? Harri was telling Cain what he had done wrong in more detail, with the aid of Ave; Ciro was still busy with Paco, trying to get him to breathe properly, and trying to calm down, himself; and Gonchi and Ava, he didn’t want to know.

Besides, he didn’t want to be there in case the tides turned against him again. And they would, if he read the room right, which he prided himself on his superior ability to do on most days.

With the others distracted, sneaking away to look for the others should be easy. Weaving around the others he’d done enough times. Walk quick enough to not meet anyone’s eyes, duck under gazes, know when to keep away. One, two, three, one, two, three. Like a waltz.

He couldn’t deny he breathed more easily when he was away from the armed women. At least it had only been blades and not something more organic, something almost familiar.

Now... where to go? He, himself, looking for a place to hide away the uglier parts of himself that were vulnerable and not to be seen, would lock himself in his room. And, if he were Quiet, returning to the one place everyone had just come *out* of would buy him just a little extra privacy by way of no one really wanting to return to an impromptu panic room.

Still, he kept his hearing sharp. And it bore fruit. People made noise when moving. This house's acoustics could be great, but not so great his footsteps produced an echo.

The footsteps of others, though...

He turned his head in a blink. Connie's unsurprised gaze met him. Could've been worse. Could have been someone actually threatening.

"What are you doing here?" Oli more mouthed than whispered.

"You realize what you're about to walk into? *Someone's* gotta be the comic relief."

"What are you *talking about*?"

"You're joking," Connie looked genuinely baffled. "You realize your actions have consequences, right? You're walking the exact right path to end up with your most recent ones' in your face. Completely exposed. Unavoidable. No way to turn back around. *I'm* coming to watch the fireworks. *You're* here for the explosions."

"I already got enough explosions from the others."

"Not like where we're headed," Connie said, shaking his head and brushing past Oli to lead the way. "You don't even *know* the fuse you just lit, come on!"

"And I'm supposed to think you would've given us a better outcome?" *Don't be naive.*

"Better outcome.' *Psh.* See, and *that* attitude is why you're seeing explosions where I'm watching fireworks." Connie shrugged, then looked back over his shoulder at Oli as he walked. His smile showed teeth. "Let loose a little! Or else this next impact's gonna *hurt.*"

That wasn't foreboding at all. Surely everyone knew he had done his best fending away a threat to everyone's lives *all by himself*, right? Connie himself was saying a 'better outcome' wasn't on the cards. So why was he starting to get goosebumps?

He knew why. He just didn't want to admit it, not even in the privacy of his own mind.

Regardless of if they (if he) was ready or not, Connie was setting the pace, and they were at Quiet's door in the next instant. He could hear voices within.

"...you're going to be okay. You can get through this." That was Fernando. "We've been through worse, right? This isn't anything. You'll be alright."

"And we're here with you," Grace added. Oli hadn't really ever taken note of just how *layered* her voice was. Beyond a human voice. It was a sound a person of flesh couldn't

make. It sounded like air and morning mist and frost on a windowsill. Vaporous yet patterned.

Oli caught movement in his peripherals and saw Connie tilting his head encouragingly to the door.

Normally, he'd be all-for some eavesdropping. What better way to learn what others are thinking than to listen in on the things they say when they think they're alone, when they think he's not around? Eavesdropping with a *witness* was a less attractive prospect. Crashing in on their conversation *now*, though, was even less attractive.

"Like old times, right? This is your room. It's just four walls, really, nothing fancy about it. Your bed. It wasn't made right before, that's fixed now. You're sitting on it. It's soft. Just basic... whatever mattresses are made of, cotton maybe?"

"Feathers?" Grace supplied.

"No, no, it'd be, like... linen, maybe, also," Nando said. There was a beat of silence, then a sound like tapping on fabric to fill it. "Um. Your nightstand, over there, to your side... Oh, the window. It's still daylight out, the day's hardly even started, still plenty of time to do plenty of things. Grace is here, too, by the way. She can't really sit with us, incorporeal and all, so she's just floating. She's here for you, like she said. You can tell she's here, because the air around where she is is just a little chillier. And you know I'm here because I'm talking. You're not alone. And this is where you are, with us. Nowhere else, with no one else."

Oli was not enthusiastic about the fact that he still hadn't heard Quiet speak a single word. And Nando had been taking care of him when he got unresponsive since the beginning? How did he know what to say?

Quiet spoke, far too lowly for Oli to hear his words from behind the door, but he could recognize his voice. Something like relief hit him and he tried not to exhale too loudly about it. It was quiet. The air around him felt cold.

Later, Oli would deny he jumped when Grace's head materialized in front of him, a disapproving expression set in her sunken eyes. She melted through the door like water, wisps branching out where her head met its surface like ripples in a pool. She glanced between him and Connie, then shook her head. Unamused by their eavesdropping.

"What do you want?"

"I—" *am here to help, I'll sort this out, I can smooth it over, I have a plan*, Oli started to defend himself.

"We're here to take responsibility," Connie said in his place. "Quiet's owed an explanation on why Oli here did what he did. And an apology, too."

Oli nearly pushed the words past his lips, *an apology?! No matter what, they stayed lodged in his throat*. His mind, too, had gone blank. That was... concerning.

Seeming to take his silence as an affirmation, Grace sunk back in. Oli stared at the closed door a second longer before realizing, oh, he had to open it himself. His hands felt like lead weights at his sides.

He couldn't look weak in front of Connie, so he steeled himself. Staring straight, stiffly, he pushed it open. It felt like it weighed a thousand tons. And for the first time ever, gazes on him felt like ants crawling all over.

Nando's especially. It was an open secret that he hadn't liked Oli much in his own path in the woods, but he had never seen him so accusatory. No, that couldn't be right. *He* hadn't done anything!... The thought fizzled up and died before it could shield him. He stopped making eye contact with Nando, then, avoided it at all costs. It did nothing to stop the ants; if anything, they just crawled faster.

It took everything in him to not fidget.

Quiet wasn't looking at him at all. He didn't know if that was a good thing. He couldn't come up with anything to say, nothing to break the ice. He felt like the ice would be best unbroken.

"Well?" Nando prompted, and his tone was so jarringly unlike the tone Oli just heard from him behind the door. Short, clipped, impatient. Oli had spent so long stalling he felt he'd forgotten how to do much else.

An owed apology, and yet Quiet told him not to blame himself, and yet Oli had done a bad job. No. He was just doomed from the start. No. But he couldn't think of anything else.

"Why...?" Quiet mumbled. Oli only caught it because the room had been silent so long. The man lifted his head to look at Oli, his eyes sad and tired and aged far beyond what people could live. Could survive. "You got us out. And now you're putting us back. Why...? You were scared of what they'd do, how they could hurt us, and then we have to go back? I don't..."

He was going to kill you, or, I had no other choice, or, I wasn't thinking, or, I didn't know what else to do, or, I was afraid.

Why did the 'why' matter?

"I don't want to go back," Quiet said. Something sharpened. The room. The air. The ants on Oli's skin, stabbing him a million times over with little knives, burning. Quiet's voice raised and yet he'd never seemed quieter, he stood and yet he'd never seemed smaller. "I don't want to. I don't want to do it all again. I don't want to see it, remember it. I don't want to do this —" his breath hitched— "*I don't want to do this!*"

Oleander knew that. Had known all along, but he didn't know how to help, how to make this better. Apologizing was dead air, it wouldn't solve anything, and prattling on even less. He didn't know what to say, and without words he had nothing.

So he said nothing.

There was nothing to say.

She was waiting for it.

There were answers, lessons, gifts waiting inside the box, but it was the key.

That was what the game had said, and that was what Borja was left to interpret. So they were left waiting for Quiet, and for the others, to return. It took longer than it should have; as Borja knew with Thelka, if She wanted Quiet, then Quiet needed to be here. That urgency ticked on with the clock.

Being with his goddess, in the meantime, was more than worth the effort of Quiet's conversion. He spent his every waking moment curled around her finger and bound to her in chains. His will was an extension of hers'. His mind was an empty well waiting to be filled by her wisdom. No thought he had was left unseen by her eyes, nor unspoken in her presence.

All of him was known by her and molded to her liking; there was no part of him she was not sure to correct. The touch of her angelic fingers carding through the delicate fibres of his soul was as featherlight as it was lingering as it was everlasting. It was perfect. He had no reason to worry or care for anything but her; this was no more than a side-project, an additional burden he took up in her name and honor: to teach another the glory and pleasure in suffering and servitude.

By her side, he was able to experience things that a few days ago he thought impossible. Such as: when the other women were free from their roles and the expectations of the unfair loops everyone was forced to perform in, they were almost... pleasant. Almost.

And he wasn't just saying that because Plethora had helped in calming down Felipe the other day. He wasn't that shallow.

Borja was quite glad Felipe couldn't read minds. He didn't want to know how he would react if he knew the missing girl he missed the most was Damiana. There had been a tentative sort of understanding between them. A gentleness to her nature, foreign to him and his interactions with anyone else; an unspoken consideration for those other than herself, him included—him under special consideration, even. And he behaved differently from the others, to her, as well; he had no real motives or plans for her, no desires that burned like shadows beneath his skin—and a respect for her and her autonomy, above his own. A sense of respect for others, though perhaps not themselves, that linked together and complemented the other's strengths. Borja wondered, minutely, if she was doing alright. And if she'd be coming back soon.

It wasn't like he had bought the lies Oli had been spinning like a spider. That three of the girls were missing, yes, but for them to be missing for so long? They had to be somewhere. And sometimes the simplest answers were the correct ones.

At the very least, the others coming back would mean he'd make some progress in his side project.

The *other* attempted conversion, by contrast, was going... poorly. Felipe was a well-meaning man with the deepest set of convictions Borja had ever seen. And that was the crux of the problem.

Felipe was a man of self-sacrifice, much like Borja himself, though not quite. Just to the left of Borja's devotion to Thelka was Felipe's devotion to Dami, not devoid of submission in the way Borja's relationship was, but certainly missing key elements. Borja gave because giving was what he was made to do; it was all he was, and it was all he was good for. There were those who gave, and those who took, and the latter were made to control the former. Felipe gave *and* took; gifted with expectations of a return, not necessarily a gift, but appreciation and validation of his virtues. He lived with an optimism that he, and all he did, and all he believed in, was inherently good; that there was an inherent evil that he needed to end. That he would give everything to protect his loved ones, or his loved *one*, from.

There was something beautiful and admirable in that mindset. And it was not wholly dissimilar to Borja's; and that made Felipe, ultimately, a promising convert. He could embrace pain, as Borja had, in the belief that there was good to come of it: lessons, a moral to the story it told; power, a resilience against evil it granted; and opportunities, perspectives it opened up. He could understand, unlike anyone else, just what it was that drew Borja to endure suffering and agony for Thelka's sake. He could understand the mantra.

Felipe could understand Borja. He was the only one of the other house, the original house, to try. And Borja wanted him to succeed. It would be nice to have someone speak the very same language as him. They were in the same chapter, though not quite in the same page. He hoped he could catch his friend up.

He had just been recovering from the utter disaster that had been their attempt to get Borja's things back. Felipe's hands, last he checked, still hurt, though what was more wounded was his pride. (For the most part, this was good; some pain was necessary on the road to enlightenment. The desert was an arduous walk.)

He just hoped Felipe could keep his temper in check, though he wasn't expecting miracles.

There was no knock on the door. There was no reason for it, when someone had a key. No reason to pretend the air hadn't been thick with the anticipation of a promise to be kept. Everyone was already in their seats, after all. The Chimera's ears swiveled around. He wondered what she was hearing, who walked in first.

Borja could almost feel— no, did feel— the sudden (*reluctance*) (*terror*) that swept over him with the proximity. In hindsight, throughout the wait, he had felt traces of similar things, bits and pieces of feedback and garbage data from a source he wasn't paying attention to. He hadn't given much thought to his first thread. It made him realize how much easier it could have been to speak his mind through it. Maybe if he had, he wouldn't have been kicked out.

Then again, if he had done so, then Felipe would've been lonely, and he would have been gone from his goddess' side for longer still. It was fortunate, if not divinely pre-ordained, that things worked out the way they had—that he had forgotten his connection to Quiet in his haste to correct it.

To his left, Felipe had tensed like he was a bloodhound.

A click of a lock and one slammed-open door later, Ava ducked below the doorframe— unsuccessfully, her horns clacked as they made contact— and let herself in.

Ava was a mystery to Borja, for all that she was simple. She was strong, as was evident by her rippling musculature, but in a barbaric way, almost animalistic in her impulses. Her relationship to Gonzalo was... gruesome, if not outright unsightly. He wondered, genuine curiosity absent, which of them influenced the other. He knew her strength only second-hand, being told after-the-fact that she was the one to lift and carry him away from his rightful place next to his goddess. A singlehanded effort to force Borja away from all he needed because that was what she assumed he wanted, without so much as asking him.

Everything happened for a reason. If Ava hadn't done that, he wouldn't have been able to give his goddess so much information.

Ava glanced at the pre-set room, everyone already in their places ready to get the show rolling, or the game playing, and locked eyes with Felipe. She scowled, sharp teeth glinting in the low ambient light, and stepped out of the way to let the others through. She refused to look away from Felipe.

Right behind her, being led by the hand, was Felipe's brother: Gonzalo.

Those two had as many similarities as they had differences. Felipe's hair was so light one could be forgiven to mistake it as white in the sun, Gonchi's was darker in comparison. Both had similar body types, but Borja had been under the impression only Gonchi could be scary. His form was naturally imposing and dangerous, muscles trained onto an already hulking body type. He wore the harm he had the capacity to inflict on his sleeves, unlike Felipe who wore his heart. Gonchi was grizzled and unapproachable with a beard that veiled expressions, but Felipe did his very best to be the direct opposite: clean-shaven, skin cream and lip balm to keep himself soft and pretty, with the facial expressions to match.

Nonthreatening. Well, he'd seen how far that disguise went.

Borja avoided Gonchi's gaze. His nose might've not been broken by some miracle but he wasn't keen on repeating the experience. He and Ava exchanged words by the door.

Right after them came the three— Borja had to rub at his eyes to understand what he was seeing. Because it made no sense.

There was Ave, third-shortest, big ears, brown hair a bush that stopped by his jaw, very much not comfortable in that place. Body made to run and to not fight unless absolutely necessary. That was what had been true from the last time Borja saw them, except both of them locked eyes, and... Ave smiled, a carnivorous smile.

Then, peeking out from behind him was Paco, brown eyes hauntingly wide, head on a swivel. Even his red hair seemed electrified from anxiety, frizzy and puffed up as it was. It was the only part of the picture that conformed to his expectations.

And then— who was that? He was shorter than the other two, impressive considering Ave's meagre size, but his complexion was bright and saturated. Light, lively eyes, brownish hair cut too short to style... where were his scars? Ciro was supposed to have scars.

Borja gulped at the glare aimed at him. Yes, definitely Ciro.

Oli slunk past, a tension in his frame and an undue haste in his stride. He surveyed the room with a certain anxiety, making the briefest moment of eye contact with Borja. The practiced smile on his face was strained, even as he grinned wider and his eyes did not crinkle, even as he spun on his heel to turn back to the others still coming in.

Where was the person who had talked to an irate Felipe so confidently, he wondered. Or was his confidence all a facade?

Behind him was Connie, more serious than Borja had ever seen him. He wasn't sure how bad that was. Harri looked the same as always, strolling together with Tabi like he lived there.

Then: Cain.

It was like the room had been empty, for all the attention he gave them. And yet, to Borja, and to Felipe he assumed as well, it was like no one else in the room mattered. He paused only to locate a place to sit, not even stopping his stride as much as he just decelerated for a single step, and walked with the same purpose devoid of passion he held with everything, a casual air wholly unfitting considering all the turmoil both the hosts and even the guests endured to come together again. It was so utterly, bafflingly, enragingly disaffected that Borja hadn't even paid attention to who followed him, so distracted by how disrespectful he was being.

What was worse, he was sure that was his intention. To rile them up the same way he had done before with Felipe, and internally with Borja himself. It was infuriatingly effective despite knowing his cruel intentions, though hearing Felipe rant about it the whole way back had been surprisingly cathartic. He even joined in, near the end. It had been... nice.

The way Cain's gaze fell on Felipe's too-stiff-to-be-natural position of his hands and the way his lips twitched was definitely not. The nerve...

Winnie was... a lot more *floral* than when he had last seen her, and not necessarily happy about it. Grace was the same as always, he didn't even know if ghosts could change. She floated to some place she was meant to be, and behind her, Winnie stood beside the door preparing to close it. There was no one else outside.

He counted in his head. There were people missing.

Borja turned back and his eyes widened without his permission. He elbowed the man at his side. "Pipo, look."

Felipe turned back as well.

Borja's first thought was how he had missed her. Not that he would ever tell Felipe that.

The second was that she was smiling at him, not at Felipe. When she tried, it wavered at the edges. She couldn't hold his gaze, glancing away from him again and again despite her attempts to maintain it. She was nervous. Borja wasn't sure why. He wanted to help.

Despite it all, she looked entirely too comfortable sitting next to Gonchi, her petite frame dwarfed by his. Had she come in with him and Ava? He hadn't seen her. Her hair was layered, done up in a fancy French braid, brought across her left shoulder and laid so it could be viewed from her front. She reached up, unconsciously, with smooth and uncalloused hands to fidget with the braid's end, where the hair was tied off and its remainder laid in a loose lock.

He nearly felt Felipe's whole demeanour change before he left his side abruptly. What was once a stewing pot of shadow and angst became suddenly alight with an optimistic, cherishing glow, the man smiling so bright and speaking so boisterously Borja had to stop himself from cringing.

"My love! *There* you are, how could I have missed you when your visage lights up the room so? I was so distraught by your absence," he said as he crossed the room. His hands— free of claws, as if they were never there at all— reached forward, either to cup her face or grab her hands, Borja wasn't sure. Dami watched the movement with an uncharacteristic heavy focus in her eyes, drawing back from his approach just barely.

Yet he was stopped. Pushed away with so much force he had to take a step back.

Felipe bristled, but Gonchi, who had stood, was looking back at Dami. She glanced from him to Felipe, then back to Gonchi, who nodded at her encouragingly. She took a breath. "I— I'd like some space, please?"

Felipe took another step back. As if struck physically by the request, by the boundary phrased as if it were a question that could be denied. His gaze snapped to her, Gonchi entirely forgotten. He opened his mouth, then closed it, in a scramble for words or for breath Borja could not tell. He saw Gonchi tense again, so readily at the defensive... or, he supposed, offensive.

He just hoped Felipe wasn't a jealous person. For Dami's sake.

"Space?" Felipe repeated, dumbstruck.

Dami looked to Gonchi again, but he was busy stopping Felipe from... from... doing something. Were they all so shaken by Felipe's visit to their house that they thought he would hurt *Dami*, of all people?... Was *Borja* afraid for her? She spoke, quieter this time, "Yes, I... I think..."

"You think...? What is it, what has you distressed?" Felipe pressed. "Is it something I have done to upset you, my love? Is it something I've forgotten? Something I've said?"

"No, no, not really," Dami mumbled noncommittally, cutting herself off. She broke what little eye contact she'd managed to glance to the floor. "You startled me, that's all. But I'm staying here, if— if that's okay with you."

“‘Startled.’ Oh,” Felipe said, stiffly standing in place, finally glancing at Gonzalo for a fraction of a second before glancing back to Dami. His hands twitched. Certainly to take hers in his own, that time, as he breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s right as rain, beloved! It’s alright, I can quiet myself just fine for you, indeed. I recognize things have been rather frightening as of late, and you had to be brave the other night with this game, but I assure you that you have nothing to fear with me. We’re just fine to sit here, fret not, not at all!”

Dami mumbled to the floor as Borja felt an urge to call his friend to come sit with him, instead. To give Dami the space she apparently needed. To let her breathe.

“This seat’s taken.” Gonzalo interrupted, eyes blazing. Maybe it was even literal. “Go back to yours, Smee, she said she wanted to sit by me today.”

“She...?” Felipe quieted down too much. He looked towards Dami. She didn’t meet his eyes.

“Felipe, come sit,” Borja called. He didn’t know if he’d be heard past the ringing in Felipe’s ears, not after that bombshell. He struggled for words to explain Dami’s need for space, to rationalize her overwhelm for the man without insulting him. “It— it would make Dami happy to see you with a friend.”

Damiana nodded at that, just to the left of frantic. “Yes! Yes, that’s all I want.”

Felipe did not move. “Surely, my love, we can sit together...? You and who you ‘wanted to sit by,’ and my compatriot and I?”

Dami glanced to Borja. Even if he weren’t aware of the fact that Dami apparently wanted space, that first request still present at the front of his mind and burning for every second it was left unmet, he wouldn’t want to be anywhere near that brute of a man beside her. He could feel his glare without even looking at him. Borja shook his head at her, hoping to encourage her to speak up again.

Felipe *knew* Gonchi had injured him, what was he *doing*?

“I— I don’t think our friends are friends... And I want you to be able to see yours!” Dami printed a smile onto her face again. It looked stiff, like a mask. Borja couldn’t help but be hurt by the insinuation of exclusion; that *he* was not Dami’s friend. He knew it was just to dissuade Felipe further, but... “It really would make me happy, for tonight. Promise!”

Felipe took another step back. “If... if it would make you happy...?” At Dami’s nod, he turned fully around and trudged back to Borja, stumbling as he sat down.

Was it truly that easy?

“I haven’t the faintest clue what is happening to my beloved, Borja,” Felipe started. Oh, no, far from it. His voice was nearing low hysterics. “I’ve done something to make her unhappy, haven’t I? I’ve frightened her, she is afraid of my very approach, just what is it that scares her so? Have you seen it? Have you seen the problem I must fix? Surely I have not hurt her somehow, you don’t think? Do you?”

Words, he could do words. “I know you’d rather put yourself than her in danger,” he began, “Sometimes, it truly is a matter of space. And don’t you enjoy my company?”

“Of course! Of course, my friend, I cherish you so— do you think that’s it? I’ve made her feel unloved, unappreciated through others? Or...” Felipe’s breath hitched. “She enjoys *my* company, doesn’t she? ‘Space,’ have I been taking up too much space? Have I stifled the flames of my beloved’s heart?!”

Borja did not know whether or not an affirmative, the truth, would help or hurt this situation. He certainly didn’t want Felipe to start panicking. A distraction, he needed a distraction now. Something that would jar him out of that anxious spiral he was getting into. He, and Felipe as well he was sure, didn’t want to endure Clara’s attempts at flirting with a creature of darkness again.

His second thread pulled taut. It rattled his ribcage with each breath he took, *he couldn’t breathe*. Knowledge burned into him as his neck was moved absent of his will, shoved aside as his head rolled and ached from the pressure, and his eyes stung with a sudden intensity that blotted his vision. He relaxed completely into it on instinct. Her Hand yanked him onto the correct path, and delicately trailed a finger down his vertebrae as he followed. He shivered, brushing past the pain that settled into him, missing the contact as it left. The burning pain in his head was warm like a loving touch, pushing out all else, leaving room for nothing else but it. He felt... flustered. But he also felt *good*. *Good disciple*. *Good little bird*.

There, sitting as if it'd been there the whole time, was Quiet. Next to who else but Fernando, of course. Shame flooded him, crushing his lungs, for failing to pay attention. He was foolish, pathetic, and blind. An absolutely useless instrument. *But Her instrument*. Her Hand pressed against his chest. *She loved him anyway*. He inhaled when Her Hand allowed him, the air sweet and precious and borderline intoxicating. *I’ll be better, I’ll be better, I’ll be better...*

Fernando sat straight as if braced for impact, and Quiet hunched over as if preparing to protect its vitals from an incoming blow. It took Borja a moment to recognize that Quiet’s scars were missing, too, a blasphemy in itself. It didn’t seem to have the same pride as Ciro in its unblemished skin, not with so many layers of clothing covering it up and its head ducked low to avoid everyone’s gazes. Somehow, despite looking just as Borja remembered it beyond its skin, Quiet looked smaller. More vulnerable, shattered. Like an important piece of it was missing.

It was the way Quiet held itself, Borja reasoned, its shoulders pressed in and low as if trying to take up as little space as possible. As if concealing some fundamental part of it away.

Good.

It *could* have realized the truth Borja had tried to impart on it all by itself, though Borja knew it was too optimistic a thought. Not with the way it was displaying how much it didn’t want to be there. He wondered who he should thank for making the reunion possible.

But that was for later.

“Look who came after all,” he interrupted Felipe before anything more could be said. His friend spluttered at being cut off from one of his impassioned speeches, but did follow his line of sight.

His expression changed in a blink, thunderous. Quiet hunched down further, practically curling in on itself, as Nando leaned down to whisper something to it. Never letting it suffer the consequences of its own actions.

Borja glanced at Felipe, wanting to commiserate as they had before. See how he was right? See what he had told him about those two? Or did he have to explain once again, this time with examples? He wouldn't mind, they were right there, the sorry things they were.

Oh. Felipe's claws were back. Borja followed his line of sight. And there, right through its heart: Borja's thread. He wondered...

(Disappointment) (Anticipation) Do you have anything to say for yourself?

(Focus) [Remain silent.]

(Fear) (Hesitation) ...

(Anticipation) (Pressure) (Intent) Then are you finally ready to listen?

(Alarm) (Recognition) (Guilt) ...!

(Weakness) (Fragility) (Uncertainty) [Say nothing.]

Was this how his Goddess felt when She broke it the first time, when She made him hatch?

(Pressure) (Compassion) There is something you must understand. You will return to Her in the end.

Quiet tried to fight the words, Borja could tell, but they followed a path that led directly to its heart anyway. The truth didn't have to hurt so much. Borja made sure his was warm, like hot tears shed in total privacy, like finally letting go of childish expectations.

Felipe was silent beside him. That was... very unlike him. A little worrying. Even when he was a shadow larger than the room itself, he was talking. Should he try to get his attention?

“Hey, Carrot-top!” Razor grinned suddenly, halting Borja's train of thought. “Do you have more of those cookies?”

Paco, if possible, tensed even more, and did not dignify her with a response.

Pouting for a moment, Razor turned to Dami. “I'm glad you're back! It was really boring without you five! All day here, locked up, I was about to start climbing walls! ‘Thora nearly kicked me and Beastie out, can you believe it?’”

Tabi's head snapped up, not to look at Razor, but to stare down Plethora, a certain shock or urgency in her expression. They looked at Razor and Tabi at once, calm and scandalized and

confident, meeting the latter's gaze with a certain understanding in their eyes as they passively watched the former. Tabi blinked, twice, then turned to Razor less sharply. "Did they?"

Razor nodded earnestly. "It was cold outside. I could have *rusted*. It was so mean and rude of them! All for just a little petty thing about leaving doors open! Can you believe that?"

Tabi squinted, furrowing her brows, then leaned back, blinking as her expression cleared. At her side, Harri went to wrap his arm around her shoulders, or a motion of something like it. He pulled her a little closer to him, anyhow, murmuring something Borja couldn't hear from where he was sitting.

"What about leaving doors open?" She asked, her tone a little subdued.

Plethora tilted their heads at her. "Just that we want to keep the warm air in. You leave a door open and all the air escapes, and the chill starts creeping in through the cracks, and soon there's no warm air left at all. Just the cold." A couple of Plethora's faces winked playfully as they turned fully towards Razor, appraising her. "And then you'd have rusted even if you stayed inside! Plenty of time to thank us for our advice, you know."

"Yeah, I get it now!" Razor whined. "Thanks for restarting the argument, Tabi! Now I'm going to have to hear it all over and over and over and over and over and over again!"

Beast huffed in what might have been agreement. Borja still couldn't really read the chimera all too well.

"It's a lot easier when you can do all those 'overs' at once," Plethora teased.

"If we're not going to pick any snacks from the arrivals," Beast said, rising a bit from her spot to fix the room a glare. "Then can we at least fix something up here? I'm *starving*."

"Did you say thirsty?" Oli said, rising up in a flash.

"No." Beast stretched herself out, lazily shaking her head. "I'm hungry. And if the evening progresses the way it's been planned, I *will* start eating soon, be it a snack someone fixes or a snack fixed the old-fashioned way."

"Please don't start chewing on the couch again," Ava complained. Said couch, the one the chimera was lounging on, was riddled with scratch marks and loosened, ripped up fabric... and the occasional puncture mark from what looked like lion teeth. "It looked so good when I picked it out."

"Tick tock." Winnie reminded the group at large.

"I can put something together for us!" Dami said, her tone chipper as she rose from her seat. Gonchi watched her get up passively, then glanced in Borja and Felipe's direction with more intention in his glare. She walked with poise and grace, a hostess's smile on her face. "You can start the game without me, it'll be just a moment, promise."

Oli made to follow her to the kitchen. "I can help!"

Clara rose from her seat, circling Oli. Out of the corner of his eye, Borja saw Grace clench her jaw. “I will watch you make that tea. I can’t believe you actually did that! Oh, you’re going to regret it if you try again.”

Oli’s shoulders shook with her proximity, but his smile was marginally more genuine than what it had been when he first got there. “I don’t know what you’re talking about? I did nothing to the tea. Maybe you four were allergic to something in it, I will keep that in mind.”

“Speak the truth,” Thelka ordered.

Oli’s smile vanished, staring Borja’s goddess in the eyes. “I didn’t do anything.”

Clara, behind him, tensed, her form floating up in the air as if preparing to strike down at him. Her fingers curled in the air behind his head as if making to strangle him. Something felt unbearably wrong for a moment, Borja’s chest tightening at the sight, his ears ringing with static. Cold dread filled him. Her mask could not form expressions, but Borja imagined a smile as her hands reached down at his shoulders and cupped around to the front of his neck. Oli’s expression, impossibly, went more dead still, his arms going slack. His legs rooted to the ground, going stiff— was he trembling?

“Is that so?” She giggled into his ear. “Then how about you don’t do anything again. How about?”

“S-sounds great,” Oli replied, his voice strained. Clara released him, clasping her hands together and twirling out of his personal space. He rolled his shoulders in her absence with a harsh breath and a slight shiver. “I’ll just carry things out. Dami’s word!”

“You better.”

The world felt normal again. Oli fled to the kitchen at a normal pace, and for a few brief moments, he had thought that was it.

Borja had thought things would go smoothly. That was before Oli, mugs in hand, tripped over his own feet— before falling *for real*, spilling tea that soaked into the laptop at the same time he careened face first into the side of a couch.

That sounded like it *hurt*.

“What did you *do?!?*” Clara shrieked at him as he lay prone on the floor. He might’ve been knocked out— or dead— for all Borja knew; he hadn’t moved yet.

“*Ow, shit*— Nothing. I fell.” Oli mumbled into the floor. As he lifted himself up, Borja saw something dark staining the floor. He brushed himself off as nonchalantly as he could try to look, wincing between the minuscule movements and points of contact.

“Do we still have cotton?!” Tabi yelled in the kitchen’s general direction.

“Winnie needed the last of it, why?” Dami’s voice called back.

“No reason!” Oli yelled. “Everything’s under control!”

In the meantime, Plethora rushed to the laptop. Their hands became a blur of movement, wiping up the spill and lifting the laptop off the wet surface and tilting it so their many eyes could examine the damages as they worked. Oli watched them work with an uncharacteristic fascination, stepping forward as if to watch them closer, or maybe to get a better look at the private property he'd gone and damaged with his recklessness.

The monitor remained on, the sound coming from the speakers was still playing without distortion, the little lights still blinked. It hadn't even been turned off. The outer casing had been wiped clean in seconds. It was like nothing had happened at all, as if there had been no risk of damage in the first place. Five mouths sighed as one.

"Be careful." Three sets of eyes pinned Oli in place.

Oli stared at the pristine computer a second, two seconds, five seconds longer. Ten seconds had passed. Borja agreed that the lack of damage was a minor miracle, but such things were possible with a goddess in the room. Oleander ought to accept it and be grateful, in his opinion. Finally, he nodded, his gaze growing distant, still uncomprehending. "Right. Yes. Will be— will do."

Connie handed him a napkin. He didn't seem to have realized blood was flowing from his nose.

Right. Back to the game, the menu, the music, everything as it should be.

The Narrator

You're on a path--

The screen went grey. Plethora choked, trembled, was impassive. Oli's lips had started to stretch. And—

There was an image on the screen, but it was wrong. They weren't supposed to be in the cabin yet, faced with the choice of taking the blade or not taking it. That wasn't supposed to happen.

"Oh, good," Cain said. "Nothing happens in the woods, anyway."

"What? Who did that?" that was Harri, startling Borja out of the same worries. "We've never started in the cabin before."

"That's not what's important here, if this thing gets broken it's on him!" Clara was obviously more affected by the malfunction on itself, pointing at Oli like he had actually stabbed her in the back. "It's not only for games, you know! I was the one who had to sit through Tabi's lecture on viruses!"

"For good reason," Tabi muttered.

Harri leaned near her, whispering something Borja couldn't catch. Something that made Tabitha shake her head.

“Is tea damage worse than water damage?” Connie asked, patting Oli on the shoulder.

“Tea is mostly water,” Paco said. “It does everything water does *and* makes surfaces sticky if not cleaned up right.” He glared at the room. Oh, yes, Borja remembered that particular afternoon. “So: yes.”

“Then shouldn’t we turn it off so it doesn’t damage the circuits?” Winnie asked.

“What a *great* idea, you are thinking ahead and I commend you for it. You are *such* a problem-solver,” Oli answered, and she sneered at him. He clapped his hands together. “Who *knows* how bad it could get if we just ignore it, you are *so* right.”

Since when did Oleander agree with *her*?

“Even Oli is able to try and move on from past hurts...” Felipe muttered to him, obviously still thinking of his own relationship problems.

“That can’t be it.” Borja answered him.

“No, we shouldn’t.” Every time Plethora spoke with all their mouths he jolted. Luckily, it didn’t happen very often. “Everything is working fine. Nothing internal’s been damaged. Let’s just keep going.”

Winnie squinted, her tail lashing back and forth. She glanced between Plethora and Oleander, her lips pressed into a thin line. And then she stood. “Fine, then,” she said, moving to duck under Plethora and take the seat at the computer. “Let me have this turn. I have some ideas on how *mine* should’ve gone, and I’d like to show you how it’s done. No sneaking, no lying, no cheating or backstabbing. Watch and learn.”

From the way Gonchi grinned, Borja already had an idea of who they would get.

“First of all,” Winnie started, her voice as loud as it was shrill, demanding attention. “Drop the pretenses. Come in with the blade already in your hands if you’re planning on using it.”

The Narrator

The door to the basement creaks open, revealing a staircase faintly illuminated by an unseen light in the room below. This is an oppressive place. The air feels heavy and damp, a hint of rot filtering from the ancient wood. If the Princess really lives here, slaying her is probably doing her a favor.

Her voice carries up the stairs.

Who's there?

Voice of the Hero

She sounds... dangerous... It's almost as if she's the one in charge down here.

The Narrator

Don't let it fool you. It's all part of the manipulation.

- “Hi”
- “Just checking in on you.”
- “I'm here to save you!”
- (Lie) “I'm here to save you!”
- “Hey, I think I'm here to slay you?”
- Continue down the stairs.

Winnie grinned as she saw the options on the stairs, something dark settling in her vision. “Look here: just what I’m after! Honesty! Something some people,” she hissed unsubtly, throwing a casual glare in the general direction of ‘behind her,’ “are sorely lacking in! Not me! I’m here to kill someone and I’m going to be honest about it!”

“What?!” Grace cried, affronted.

Cain was nodding in agreement. Borja didn’t know why he had expected anything different.

Felipe was looking at her like he was seeing her for the first time and didn’t like the sight.

- “Hey, I think I'm here to slay you?”

Ohohohoho, are you now? Why don't you come down and let me take a look at you.

The Narrator

Great job, you gave away the element of surprise. Good luck, hero.

Winnie rolled her eyes. “That’s the point, rat.”

The Narrator

You walk down the stairs and lock eyes with the Princess. There's a heavy chain around her wrist, binding her to the far wall of the basement.

Voice of the Hero

She's so coldly beautiful... is she really a threat to the world?

The Narrator

Focus on the task at hand.

You weren't kidding when you said you were here to kill me.

Winnie scoffed, then skimmed her options and cackled a little under her breath. Her demeanor was starting to unsettle Borja, if he were entirely honest. She radiated malice.

- “Yeah, it wasn't a joke.”

“It wouldn’t have been funny if it was,” Ciro commented. “Dying tends not to be.”

There were various uncomfortable murmurs of agreement throughout the room.

“Well, it depends on your delivery,” Connie said. The murmurs of dissent were louder.

I know. You brought a knife with you and everything. But you don't have to try and kill me. You could always toss that scrap of metal to the ground, and give the two of us a chance to talk things out.

Voice of the Hero

She makes a compelling point. What if we didn't kill her? What if we just dropped the blade and talked?

The Narrator

Don't you dare.

Voice of the Hero

It's fine. We can decide what we want to do *after* we talk to her. Maybe she really is a monster. But killing someone in cold blood isn't very becoming of us.

“Winnie,” Tabi said, her tone stern. It sounded like a warning.

“What?” She spat back. “I’m *not* dropping it. I’m proving a point.”

- [Drop it.]
- [Tighten your grip.]

“Winnie!”

“It’s already *happened!*” Winnie’s tail was twitching. She seemed to be making a concerted effort to keep it still. “I’m not doing anything any of *them* haven’t already, and this is *leagues better* than what that little creature—” she pointed to Oleander “—did to *me*. This is *someone’s* experience, isn’t it? I’m not going to be made to back down just because you’re uncomfortable with it.”

“And it’s something new to see,” Cain said. He was leaning forward. Borja couldn’t discern if he was talking about the game or about Winnie.

The Narrator

You ignore the trembling in your hands and tighten your grip on the blade.

You poor thing, your hands are shaking. Are you... scared of me? Because you should be.

“That’s right,” Clara mused. The room was silent for a moment in response. But Winnie kept talking, absorbed in her cathartic reverie of bloodlust.

“I’m not scared. Why are they acting like I’m scared?” Winnie sat up. The fur at the end of her tail puffed out. “What’s *scared* is taking *shortcuts*! What’s *scared* is lying about your intentions and playing hard to get. What’s *scared* is cheating around someone instead of just speaking your mind and being honest from the start..”

“Even if being honest gets you killed?” Nando hesitated.

“It won’t,” Gonchi and Cain said at the same time.

Borja had to disagree. Winnie was acting with a lot of bravado, but the twitching of her tail and the strain of her voice gave her away. She wasn’t going to get what she wanted out of this. This was just more evasion, a bluff to make her feel larger than she was. And it was going to be a painful fall from grace when she inevitably failed in whatever it was she was set out to accomplish.

“Scared is also refusing to make the choice you know is right,” Clara added. “And having to have someone else take control to get anything done.”

“There’s nothing wrong with letting your superior take control,” Borja argued. “Nothing wrong with giving up the act and giving in. It’s okay to let go. It’s natural. Beautiful, even, if you let it be.”

“Your ‘superior?’” ...Borja didn’t understand what he had said wrong, yet Ava looked disgusted. It was the truth. Surely some people there could see that.

“That kind of thinking gets you killed.” Paco said curtly.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Connie spoke for the first time in a while.

“Life isn’t ‘fun.’” Borja knew he shouldn’t take the bait, but Connie was an expert on laying it.

Yet he just stared at him. “What a sad, sad person you are.”

The Narrator

You step forward, your grip on the blade tightening as you steel your resolve.

I’m probably chained up in this basement for a reason, right? And if that knife is the only weapon you have, you’ll have to get close enough to use it. So... you should just drop it. Best not to risk finding out what I can do.

The Narrator

She’s unarmed. If you hesitate now, it’ll be too late. End this

- (Explore) What if she isn’t bluffing? What if she kills us?
- (Explore) Are you sure she’s not armed?
- (Explore) “I’m sorry. Can we just talk?”
- “I’m not dropping the blade.”

“And you see, right there. *Right. There.*” Winnie hovered the mouse over the final option, highlighting it in red, the color doubtlessly to stain the basement floor. “That’s what should’ve happened. The ‘element of surprise?’ That’s a game cowards play.”

“Oh?” Cain spoke up, tilting his head and turning from the screen to Winnie. “I thought you were here to ‘kill someone.’ You talked a lot about your intent, but now you’re giving her a fighting chance... Is there a moral high ground if she ends up dead either way?”

Winnie bristled. Caught in her act.

“Don’t listen to him,” Gonchi advised.

“If you’re going to kill someone, you have to earn it,” Ava agreed. “There’s no point without the struggle. It’s not the same without the thrill.”

“There’s no hunt if the prey has no chance of survival,” the chimera yawned. “You’re doing just fine, kit, you’re learning.”

“How interesting.”

- “I’m not dropping the blade.”

Then I'm not talking to you.

“We’re on the same page, then,” Winnie muttered. “Talking when your intent is petty murder is such...” She trailed off.

“‘Petty’ murder?” Ciro echoed, something like utter disbelief in his tone.

“You don’t have to do this,” Nando spoke up. “You can still drop it.”

“Like hell I’m backing out *now*.” Winnie said, hunching down and honing in on the screen. It was a thing of pride, Borja concluded. The more they tried to dissuade her, the more she’d dig her heels in. She’d have to learn the hard way: one bone-crushing beatdown at a time. It was almost nostalgic.

“Go for the throat, kit,” Beast advised. “That’s where the pulse is most vulnerable.”

“And more blood will spill!” Razor said cheerily.

“You’re talking about murdering me,” Grace spoke up, tone flat.

“Me as well, technically,” Tabi said, wincing. “Us... both. Or neither of us. Or...”

“It’s neither of you,” Gonchi said.

“The heart’s a better target, anyway,” Cain said, apparently invested in the prior discussion.

“Just shut up and *do it!*” Ava yelled.

- “Fine then, I guess we're at an impasse!”
- [Squint at the Princess while holding onto the blade.]
- [Drop the blade.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

“I’m back!” Dami announced cheerily, walking back with a tray. She eyed the dark stained floor with raised eyebrows before focusing on the screen.

Right at the wrong time, too.

The Narrator

Doubt, unfortunately, clouds your thoughts as you attempt to run her through. A moment of distraction and hesitation is all she needed to sidestep your thrust and deliver a catastrophic blow to your jaw. It feels like you've been hit with a sledgehammer. You can feel bone grinding on bone where your jaw has been fractured.

Voice of the Hero

Holy shit that hurt!

The Narrator

Though she's unarmed, the shock of that first strike is enough to stagger you, putting you and the Princess on somewhat equal footing.

“Oh, no!” Dami cried, genuine distress on her face. Borja pushed Felipe down the moment he saw him try to stand up. “Why are we fighting each other? What happened?!”

“We’re golden, Dami, we’re perfect,” Ava grinned, helping her put the tray down and guiding her back to Gonchi’s side.

Borja felt a phantom pain in his jaw, his neck, his sides... He couldn’t help but notice the way Fernando, too, seemed to reach up to his face as if to shield it.

But something was wrong. He didn’t quite remember the exact blows that led to his hatching, but they remembered him. And they definitely weren’t the ones on the screen.

The Narrator

Your blade slashes through the air again and again, and her fists connect with your body as many times or more, each impact as heavy as that first bone-crushing hit.

Voice of the Hero

We can still turn this around.

- [Give up.]

- [Finish the job.]

“What?” Borja blurted out. That had been a choice? It had felt predestinated, an inevitability, the only path there ever was. He had pretty much finished hatching at that point, so the thought that both him and *Gonzalo* of all people had been on equal footing was as strange as it was distressing.

“As if we’d just roll over and die,” Gonzalo said, almost laughing. “Of course we’d make that choice. Of course. The fight doesn’t end until the world does.”

“It couldn’t have been that easy,” Harri said, opening a notebook.

Gonchi’s face screwed up. He seemed insulted by the insinuation. “Who said anything about easy? You make the choice *because* it’s hard.”

That made no sense at all. Harri paused before scribbling something down.

The Narrator

You and the Princess stare at each other, both gasping for breath, equally exhausted. You probably won't make it out of here alive, but you can at least make sure that she won't make it out of here, either.

Voice of the Hero

Excuse me?

“Really?” Ava turned to Nando. “I thought you were into it too.”

Nando seemed too stunned to speak. Not that Borja thought he’d have anything complimentary to say.

The Narrator

Do you think this is what I wanted to happen? I have a duty to state the facts of the situation, and honestly, it's a miracle anyone is still standing right now. Can you not feel all those ruptured organs bouncing around in there? If the Princess doesn't do our friend in herself, internal bleeding is certain to finish the job. The two of you clash for the final time. You feel your ribs break as she delivers a heavy blow, but you push through the pain, falling forward and sinking your blade deep into the Princess' heart.

O... oh.

The Narrator

The two of you fall to the floor.

This was fun.

The Narrator

The Princess gasps, her voice an unhealthy rasp as her lungs start to fill with blood.

You put up more of a fight than I thought you would...But I have to wonder... Do you really think this is the end?

The Narrator

But you don't have time to worry over such things. Everything goes dark, and you die.

"You know," Ava started, turning to Quiet. It glanced in her direction, then steadily held her gaze as if it'd been preparing for this moment. She smiled, wide and genuine and dark. "I really have to thank you. It *was* fun."

It nodded, then smiled a little back. It glanced to Gonchi, for just a moment, brightening just a little further. "It was worth it."

"Better not repeat it." That was, unexpectedly, from Gonchi.

"Are you jealous?" Connie raised his eyebrows.

"Of course not, Quiet's just not into it," Gonchi said like that was obvious.

It was tacitly understood by everyone back at the nest that leaving Quiet alone wasn't an option while they were with the enemy. Which meant that someone had to follow when they went to another room with Plethora. That someone ended up being Connie by virtue of being one of the only ones who noticed.

"What have you done?"

He had wanted to talk to his Stranger, to apologize for his role in making them what they were, but anything that made Quiet sound like *that*... a voice the tone of howling winds in the far distance... a growl the pitch of a creak in a house in the dead night air...

He stopped to listen, too. He never thought he would get an opportunity if Quiet didn't want him to. Most of the time that happened, Quiet was too distracted to notice.

There was something in the air. The air hummed sickly cold, almost a liquid thing, making ripples every time Connie moved. Goosebumps raised on his skin. In contrast, his insides warmed up, almost feverish.

"We're not sure what you mean," Plethora answered as one, five voices overlapping.

"The girls, some of them visited me and I learned some pretty distressing things. Like that they feel like they can't leave the house? That something's been altering them, changing their minds? I thought you understood the value of differing perspectives."

"Their changes are their own. And one cannot predict what they will want when they have changed. They're scared, but change itself is not scary if it's a capacity you embrace," Plethora said. Their tones lightened. "Besides, a multitude of perspectives is most valuable

when focused on one subject, don't you agree? They can see us as we cannot see ourselves. There's more to learn this way."

"I know it's you. You're Her heart. It can't be anyone else," Quiet pressed.

"Just as you are *your* heart. You are like us, and we are like you," Plethora said, their voices soft and understanding. "We see the others the same as how you see your others. They are the ones who change their minds, perspectives ebbing and flowing in tides and waves and melding together into new understandings. Our influence is just a single drop in the ponds of their multitudes; everything beyond that is ripples in the water."

"But you can't do this to them, it's not right," Quiet argued. "Where do you *stop*? When does the line get drawn? When are you changing their minds simply because you're afraid they'll change in a way you don't like? When does it escalate too far to recover from, and a little ripple in a pond becomes a tidal wave to wash them away?"

Something snapped like frayed string in the air.

"Do you really have to ask that? You know already, we've *already* crossed the line; it's far too late to save anyone now." Ah, Connie recognized Miss Blood-and-Destruction's voice, at least. A familiar monster. One he'd prefer not to be hearing separate from the rest, though. "You're too busy worrying about the ones you never had a chance to save in the first place. You're better off worrying about your own than mine, before I snatch *them* up, too! There's only nine left in your command!" She cackled unsettlingly before Connie heard a sound like a hand smacking against a cheek and a low *thump-thump-thump*, like someone stumbling on their feet from the recoil.

"Not the time," a low, dull voice chastised, tone blank and unreadable.. They began overlapping again. "We don't mean that. We'll never mean that. We're under pressure and need to think out our answers. We're... upset. But we can talk it out."

A chorus of breath. Then, silence: a long pause in a symphony. The softest sound of shuffling, getting ready before the show started... and a crescendo, voices rising.

"And if they're 'washed away?' What then? We've been washed up this whole time, cast aside like unwanted trash. It never gets easier to understand, it's never easier to be like this, *look at us*," a mopier voice said. Regret didn't make it any easier for Connie to breathe, not in the brief silence of a demonstration. He imagined them pointing to themselves, or gesturing with their many arms. "We're weird. A stranger to ourselves, even more so than to you. Is it really so bad that we want to reach out to a second chance for understanding when it's offered? To see it all again, but *not* all at once for a change? From the eyes of someone who can see us as we've never seen ourselves before? As something in linear time, with a static progression? We can't connect with the others like you can. We don't just *get* how to be people, like *you* got to. We're all stuck together, with them stuck with us, too."

"Some of them don't *want* to be stuck together!"

"How dare—? Don't you—! Like *we* asked for *you* to—?!" Multiple voices rang out at once, overlapping and interrupting each other. "It's not a matter of want, it's a matter of what we

are!” They sounded distressed. They sounded pained. They sounded angry.

He wanted to help, he wanted to— that was *his* Stranger, Quiet wasn’t the one to blame. He wasn’t the one they should be angry at, it wasn’t like he knew what would happen—

“We’re not trying to hurt anyone!” Oh, the gentle one surfaced. Connie could hear her alongside the mopey one, now. He didn’t particularly like the combination; they harmonized well enough, but the new addition sounded *way* too much like Dami. “We’re trying to prevent people from getting hurt. Some of their impulses are so terrifying, so unlike anything we can understand— most of us, at least. We can’t just let them free. We want... we need...” the pair paused, apparently struggling together for words, “help—? connection—? *understanding*, from someone just as much like us as they are unlike us. We’re only guiding them over their paths, down the thin trail of perspective and memory. We’re just trying to keep the peace!”

“And that includes keeping *you* safe, by the way,” someone who wasn’t Tabi, but sounded a bit like her, snarked. Her tone was pissing Connie off a little bit, and not in a fun way. “You could’ve been hurt in several dozen ways just by existing in their presence. You haven’t been. Guess whose fault that is? Ours. *You’re welcome.*”

“I never asked to *be* here,” Quiet said. Connie remembered, in fact, the exact opposite request from them. Why did he feel guilt for something that wasn’t even his fault? He knew what it was like to be at fault for something, and that wasn’t it. Why did Oli being stunned into silence make it feel *worse*? “I never wanted to do this farce.”

‘I don’t want to be here.’ Why didn’t he make them turn back? The one time it would’ve been *good* and *right*? He wouldn’t even need the thread, he could’ve picked him up and walked back, easy. Their wings were tucked away, anyway. Not safe to show them to the people here. So they were easier to carry, even if they should’ve been impossible to bind, even if *they* should’ve spread their wings and readied themselves to fly.

“And yet, you came,” all of Plethora spoke at once, voices distorted and messy but at least still together. “We’re happy to see you! All of us.”

“They’d kill my own if I didn’t,” Quiet said, and Connie found himself nodding along. “That’s a false choice.”

“It’s still a choice.”

What? No, it wasn’t, that was the whole point. It wasn’t a choice Quiet would ever make, he knew him that much to understand that.

The illusion of choice was something Connie knew well. That blade was thrown out the window twice with his help, and both times the worse outcome materialized. It was irrecoverable with the sharp one, and yet somehow Plethora still ended up with bits and pieces of themselves dead and stabbed. The system was rigged against them; best to throw it all out. Not something Connie liked thinking about, but it was something he and his Stranger shared— or at least, he thought, they were supposed to.

Choices were supposed to matter. And his Stranger was supposed to care.

That's what made them *them*, and not...

"Why can't you leave me be?" Quiet said, exhausted and resigned and all the things Connie was supposed to help him with. A deep breath, a realization. "I've had enough. We're leaving."

"You can't."

...not *Her*.

Connie's heart stuttered. A sense of foreboding dropped heavy in his gut as he took his thread and yanked with all his strength.

BACK!

Quiet didn't walk to him; he was pulled backwards, right where Connie could catch him. The impact was hard. It wasn't as cold, with his sides suddenly lighting on fire. Burning, burning, burning. Doubled pain echoed between them and he struggled to maintain composure in the face of everything collapsing in on him all at once, all over again.

Were they the same people they were at the top of the stairs?

He wanted them to be, *he wanted them to be*.

But their wings—their wings—they hid away their wings. The core of who they were, the very essence of their freedom, Connie had known it the moment he laid eyes on them just how utterly precious they were. That they needed to be spread and exercised and used, that Quiet deserved the ability to fly. They had only barely had them and he let them be led somewhere they couldn't have them, because of people like-- people like-- *who was he talking to?*

Connie took several steps back to regain his bearings, taking Quiet with him. They dragged in his arms like dead weight. He couldn't recognize who was standing in front of him. Not at all, not for a second. "Who are you?"

Plethora smiled, frowned, grimaced, sighed. Their expression remained unchanged. They took a step forward with their hands reaching out, the decision apparently unanimous between them, a movement without the slightest hint of conflict. Connie flinched back further from the threat of their touch. "We're just a stranger."

A stranger. Not his Stranger. Nothing like his Stranger. He didn't know how he ever thought they were the same. "That's right," he said, swallowing. "I don't know you. I don't know who you are at all. I don't know anything about you."

"We would like to know you," they said, all smiles.

"*We*," Connie spat the word with spite, pulling Quiet up and to his side, "don't feel the same. And you don't get to tell us what we can and can't do!"

Plethora moved to speak, shout, do something.

No.

That was it.

He was getting the final word in on the matter, case closed, conversation over. Hopefully for good this time. With Quiet, again, wrapped in his arms and his thread, he turned around. And he left.

Oleander was trying to delete the game, sitting down on the computer's seat while most of the others were preoccupied with the snacks Dami had fixed for them. Borja was watching how badly it was going, relying only on Oli's facial expressions. He had heard the idiom 'your face is a poem' but he had never seen it in action. One thing was clear: it plainly wasn't working.

Borja had to recognize his determination, misplaced as it was. Just as he had to acknowledge Felipe's persistence in his pursuit of Dami. And the fact Gonchi was more intimidating physically than Felipe was, at least right then, no matter how much Felipe tried to match him.

Gonchi's moniker did fit him well, with how he seemed immersed in his new role as a bodyguard, unnecessarily so. He was a stone wall. The foundations of a fortress in which Dami would be protected from all who sought to conquer it. Borja wondered if Felipe realized he was very nearly standing on tiptoes trying to match his height. Or was he trying to peer up and around the wall that was Gonchi and catch Dami's sight?

Or maybe he was trying to make Fernando see reason from behind the fortress's walls, even though Borja could tell him it was a Sisyphean task. An unmovable object. Maybe if one spoke to his sense of morality, to his righteousness, but one couldn't save those who didn't want to be saved.

Felipe was trying his best, though not from any sort of angle Borja would have picked.

"Have you not even the faintest glimmer of joy in your heart? Do you not understand the call of the beat deep in your chest for another? Is it simply beyond you, far above you in the clouds of a heaven you turn your back on and see *yourself* above?"

Fernando blinked up at him, momentarily thrown off. "What... are you talking about?"

"How presumptuous can you get, driving apart a pure and honest love because you see it so poorly! It is a tragedy borne of tragedy, that you cannot understand what you have not cradled delicately between your own two hands, and so you crush and strangle out the love in others' hearts!"

"Mate, I'm just sat here. Dami's fine where she is, let's take a deep breath—"

"I am *not* talking about my beloved."

So Felipe *had* been paying attention to Borja. It shouldn't surprise him at that point, he knew Felipe was the exception to the rule. Still. It was nice to be heard.

"What the bloody hell are you on about, then?" Nando said.

"Oh, you know what I mean."

But Borja was not invested in these happenings. Not in the fickle, fleeting concerns of the heart. Not in the way he was caught in between a lover's quarrel between his friend and his convert. He was much more concerned with other things, like the fact that he had witnessed Plethora and Quiet sneaking off together into the next room. It was, by coincidence, the only way Felipe was shaken out of a hate spiral into another spiral entirely. But Borja had hope that, perhaps, the talk between the two heads of the house could be enlightening for one.

That Fernando had not followed was a minor miracle. Quiet would listen better without his incessant, naive voice prattling in its ears. That *Connie* had followed was an unexpected development, but most things in retrospect tended to be, involving him. Borja got the sense that Connie simply hatched out of an unexpected development, himself, and was rolling with the momentum. Would he ever slow down?

As it turned out, Borja didn't have to ponder for long.

Judging by the speed of his footsteps, Connie was not slowing down. If anything, he was speeding up.

Without Plethora, Connie and Quiet returned, the former latched onto the latter much to Borja's disappointment. Still, it seemed Plethora did *some* good work considering its weakened posture... and what seemed to be a trickling red stain down Connie's side.

Ah. Borja hadn't considered using his goddess's more intuitive lesson plans just yet. Quiet must remember its first, but Borja thought he'd wean it back into it, as one does an infant from milk to solid foods. It made sense for a rebellious student, though; Connie wasn't one to listen to any authority, no matter how enlightening their wisdom could be.

And yet, the lesson was ineffective; Connie was just as frantic as ever, if at least paused in his movements. He looked to the chimera sprawled out on the couch; to the dark, spectral masked doll not far off; to the sharp woman they'd all died at the hands of; and, to Borja's surprise, not just to his goddess, but to himself and Felipe as well. Something hardened in his expression, a tightness in his jaw to match the tension in his frame. It was an uncharacteristically stern expression for him. Almost calculative, though he'd never been the best at math.

Harri seemed to think so, too, because he rose to meet Connie at the end of the room—Tabi hesitating before following, her footwork cautious and halting. Those two were joined at the hip, truly.

They spoke in frantic whispers. He couldn't hear, but he could see Connie's body language, restrained as it was. He kept shaking his head at Harri like a child turning their nose at their

vegetables, glancing back down at Quiet repeatedly in gesture and leaning in as if to tell Harri off. He kept repeating something, again and again, but Borja could not read his lips.

He wasn't the only one interested. The chimera had both eyes and ears fixed on them, Cain was leaning against the wall in a way that suggested gathering momentum to rise and hear better, and Oli was about to abandon his fruitless task, it seemed, hands grasping the chairs armrests.

“Oh, good, there's already a decider!” Clara clapped cheerily.

Oli froze from where he was rising, hands still on the armrests. “What? No, the spotlight isn't for me—”

“All the more reason for you to do it!” Winnie spat. “We get to see your wretchedness on full display!”

That was all she got out before Ciro tapped her shoulder. Borja couldn't see his expression, but Winnie's ears went flat as she flinched.

Borja could, very barely, make out a ‘we need to talk’ that almost made *him* flinch by proxy. He didn't sound like his usual self, hotheaded and angry. Instead, he sounded cold and disappointed.

Uncomfortable with listening further, he returned his attention somewhere else— no, he was not focusing on Ave's glare. For someone so small he could be scary sometimes. Grace was floating over the computer as if debating whether to jump in or not.

Connie huffed, shoulders going slack along with his combative attitude, then turned around with Quiet in tow and sat right where he had been, glancing at Fernando with worry. Whatever could Felipe have said to him? Either way, Borja was sure to find out before the end of the day, knowing him.

Oli smiled nervously, eyes fixed on the screen. “‘The Adversary,’ huh?”

Ava grinned, big and bright. “That's my title? Love it!”

Borja saw, Gods, how Gonchi didn't even flinch. How he saw the Princess and *named* her like he was hungry. No hesitation. He said ‘Adversary’ like a prayer. Like all he needed was a blade and a direction.

The Narrator

You're on a path in the woods. And at the end of that path is a cabin. And in the basement of that cabin is a Princess.

The Narrator

You're here to slay her. If you don't, it will be the end of the world.

- (Explore) I'm getting a terrible sense of déjà vu.

- (Explore) Wait... hasn't this already happened?
- (Explore) Okay, no.
- (Explore) But I died! What am I doing here?
- (Explore) She's going to kill me again!
- (Explore) But I already slew the Princess. Sure, she also killed me, but I definitely got her. Why am I here again?
- [Proceed to the cabin.]
- [Turn around and leave.]

“We’re asking questions this time,” Harri said. “We got cheated out of the opportunity after the computer glitched, we need to make up for that slack.”

“Yeah,” Nando agreed, unexpectedly. “I think that’s a good idea, with this one.”

“What? No!” Gonchi and Ava complained. Gonchi continued, “we just have to get to the good bit! Can’t we talk in the basement at least? Preferably during a fight?”

“Boys, you realize all of these options are *volunteering information*, right?” Oli laughed under his breath, shuffling in his seat and sliding his cursor down the menu, highlighting each one.

“The first is more discreet,” Tabi observed. “You owe us *something*, the glitch was your fault.”

“And the third gives Him nothing!” Connie added. “Nothing but a headache, hopefully.”

“Can He even get a headache?”

“I hope so, or else what have I been doing it all for?” Connie paused. “Nah, I’d do it for the love of the game, no end goal required.”

“Like I’d ever tell Him ‘no’ so bluntly? We don’t know what He’s capable of this time... I’ll go with the first, I guess.” Oli reluctantly clicked the mouse.

The Narrator

A terrible sense of deja vu? No, you don't have that. This is the first time either of us have been here.

Voice of the Hero

If He doesn't remember what happened, then maybe it's best to keep it that way.

The Narrator

You know I can hear you, right? It's going to be a lot harder than you think to keep secrets from me.

Voice of the Stubborn

That's fine. It doesn't matter if He can hear us. The only thing that matters is marching up to that cabin and winning.

“And right on cue, there’s Gonchi,” Nando nodded along, apparently comfortable in his predictable scripts.

Ava cheered. “That’s my man!”

The Narrator

That's the spirit. There's no point in squabbling when the real threat is just up that hill.

“The ‘real threat’ is somewhere beyond the hill,” Paco corrected, as Oleander took the necessary options to proceed to the cabin.

The Narrator

A warning, before you go any further... She will lie, she will cheat, and she will do everything in her power to stop you from slaying her. Don't believe a word she says.

Voice of the Stubborn

'Lying' and 'cheating' doesn't sound like her at all. Not that it matters, it's not like she can lie or cheat in the middle of a fight.

These were all hot-button buzzwords that Borja had come to expect Ciro to answer to. And, considering how last chapter went, he’d expected increased tensions between Winnie and Oleander as a result of pressing on this sore spot in their mutual past. And yet the room remained silent... if not charged with additional tension. He glanced over to see Ciro merely staring intently at Winnie, a frown set on his face.

“Easy enough to be tricked in the heat of battle,” Ave agreed, “if you don’t keep your wits about you.”

“I would *never* resort to ‘tricks.’” Ava sounded offended at the mere word. Potentially not even its use, but its existence in the first place. “What’s even the point? It’s not even real. Not without the risk of bloodshed on both ends, without the carnage and the sweat.”

Voice of the Hero

Are you sure about that?

The Narrator

The point of my warning wasn't to start an argument over what circumstances the Princess is capable of lying in. It was to give you some broadly applicable advice. The Princess will do and say whatever she thinks it will take to get her out of there. So don't trust her. Ever. Are we clear?

Voice of the Stubborn

Crystal. Let's just get on with it already.

"My mistake," Gonchi said. "Turns out you *can* cheat in the middle of a fight, as *someone* taught me."

Connie frowned. "I said I was sorry."

"No you didn't!"

The Narrator

The cabin is tighter than its exterior would suggest. Its cold stone walls press in on you, as if trying to forcefully direct you towards your destination. The only furniture of note is a black-iron altar with a pristine blade perched on its edge. The blade is your implement. You'll need it if you want to do this right.

Ava squinted, finally taking in the cabin room. The Narrator's description had not properly taken into account just how barren the room was, how barbaric its design appeared. Said 'cold stone walls' were more jagged and angular than sleek or carved, like a cliff-face, bereft of any sort of personality. It was more like a cave in the shape of a cabin than a lovingly crafted building someone might've called a home. "The hell is this?"

"The cabin, obviously," Cain said. "Were you listening?"

"No, the *design* of it!" Ava gestured to the screen as if mortally offended by what it was showing. "It's so uninviting! What is *that*? What are those wooden boards on the floor, there? There's nothing wooden in the room, where did they even come from? It's so messy! And that little ornate iron table doesn't match this aesthetic at all. If that's what they're going for they might as well commit."

"The walls are wooden." Gonchi offered.

"Then why is the inside stone?!"

"The cabin's exterior never really changes," Harri noted. "But the interior *always* does, as do the woods... It's the only exception, for some reason. Why...?"

"What about when everything... fell apart, with Clara?" Nando asked.

Harri paused, blinking. "Right. Besides then."

"I like it," Beast chimed in. "It's natural. No hiding spots."

"No comment on the mirror?"

"That mirror doesn't go well with anything."

"Morally, or...?"

"I thought it looked good on mine," Dami mumbled.

“Yours was a daydream, Dami,” Ava sighed. “The pinnacle of class and tasteful decoration.”

“The only one fit for a princess,” Felipe said wistfully. Borja silently disagreed, but couldn’t fault him; he hadn’t seen Thelka’s church yet. He hoped the game’s imagery would do it justice... but knew, ultimately, it couldn’t. It was something else to behold in person.

“Maybe it isn’t your fault, maybe Gonchi just couldn’t think of a good enough room,” Plethora suggested.

“Maybe it wasn’t Gonchi’s fault at all, maybe Ava just wanted to fight,” Connie said.

“I was busy thinking about more important things,” Gonchi bit back defensively. “Look, we only need to be here for long enough to get downstairs.”

“Moving on from insulting everyone’s decoration skills...” Oleander ground out.

Borja wondered if that meant he had to give himself a pat on the back. His goddess’ cabin had been nothing short of magnificent. There *was* an altar in this one, which he couldn’t understand. Ava wasn’t a goddess, and even if she were, it wouldn’t be on the caliber as his. Someone more... physically inclined. Thelka was not one to use Her hands... not like *that*, at least, not literally. Her Divinity granted Her another set of Hands to do Her bidding more efficiently, more gracefully, with such purity and intention it was all too clear how Her design was always meant to be. She did not need to dirty Herself by stooping down to the others’ level. That was what She had Borja for, after all.

“Why do we even need a door, that’s just another barrier,” Gonchi grumbled.

Ava tensed suddenly. “Oh, god, and the windows are asymmetrical!”

“The windows are also open holes in the wall, that seems like it’d be a bigger issue,” Tabi drawled. “You’re lucky a draft didn’t come in, this place wouldn’t protect from the elements at all.”

“Why do you get *double* doors?” Clara complained.

“Her Radiance got double doors too,” Borja recalled.

“Mine was just depressing,” Grace said.

“Oh, don’t be dramatic. They’re all just rooms,” Cain dismissed. “There’s nothing worth further examination in this one. Can we move on, now?”

Oli fidgeted in his seat, glancing to Gonchi on one side of the room, then to Ava on the other.

He hovered the mouse over the option to take the blade... and then changed his mind in an instant, instead choosing to enter the basement without. Borja watched Quiet stiffen.

“Why would you do that?” Ava crossed her arms, not very happy at all.

Voice of the Stubborn

No blade this time? Right then, fisticuffs it is. Probably more fair to her anyway. Wouldn't want to feel like we cheated our way to a win.

“Ohoho, you’re *on*. ” For a demon lady, she brightened awfully fast. Borja felt, more than saw, his goddess sigh. He remembered the weight of her disappointment well enough.

The Narrator

As long as you can still get the job done... and don't forget that the blade is waiting for you upstairs if you happen to change your mind.

“It is,” Quiet agreed a bit loudly. “You can.”

Oli glanced back to Quiet. His expression seemed... conflicted. Borja couldn't read any further.

The Narrator

The door to the basement creaks open, revealing a rough stone staircase, its walls pressing at your sides and tightening as you descend. The air seeping from below is heavy and oppressive, with an almost sulfuric odor to it. If the Princess lives here, slaying her would probably be doing her a favor. Her fierce voice carries up the stairs.

Is that another challenger? Finally. It's been ages since I've had a good fight.

Voice of the Hero

This isn't what she sounded like last time. Her voice is a little deeper, almost threatening.

Voice of the Stubborn

Good. Sounds like my kind of Princess.

Someone squealed. Several someones clapped.

“Clear observation. Things *have* changed,” Ave said, below the noise of the celebration. “A deeper voice means bigger threat.”

Gonchi glanced Ava's way and winked. Borja watched as Ava brought a closed fist to her mouth, kissed it, and mimed blowing it Gonchi's way—not quite delicately, more like it was a ranged attack. Naturally, as if he'd done it a million times, he ‘caught’ it with a simple flourish and kissed it back with such force Borja almost thought he was going to punch himself in the mouth. It would be par for the course with these two.

He wasn't the only one to think that. “Be careful with yourself,” Dami chided.

Gonchi chuckled, “I'm fine. This is nothing, really.”

“Never took you for a romantic,” Tabi commented, smiling.

“Oh, just you wait and see,” he replied, leaning back. Dami went back to rest her head on his arm. When had she gotten so comfortable?

Winnie made a gagging sound. “Ugh, gross.”

“Agreed!” Connie said cheerfully, earning a few good glares for himself. Then again, they couldn’t expect too much from him.

The Narrator

As much as I appreciate the enthusiasm, just make sure you don't let your bloodlust get to your head. You need to stay focused and keep your wits about you. Remember you're here to slay the Princess, not to have a good fight.

The Narrator

As you descend the final step, the form of the Princess comes into view, a large shackle leading from her wrist to the basement wall.

Voice of the Hero

It looks like she could rip those chains out of the wall without a second thought.

And there Ava was on the screen, somewhere that was more like a cave dug naturally than any sort of man-made structure. She was—

Borja looked elsewhere quickly. He was no Felipe, but even he could say this wasn’t *proper*. Not with the way the dress barely covered anything at all, and what it did cover didn’t do much in terms of leaving anything to the imagination.

And by averting his gaze, he saw which ones weren’t following his example.

Oli had frozen in place, eyes wide as dinner plates. For once not fiddling with the mouse. “Wow.”

Grace had hid her face between her hands. Borja wondered if it did anything or if she was as see-through to herself as she was to everyone else. “Not again!”

The chimera clicked her tongue in disapproval. “Baring your weakness to the world?”

“Excuse me?” Gonchi said, taken aback from his appreciation of the view to come to Ava’s defense.

“A skinny waist is the sign of fruitless hunt,” she explained, flicking her ear to the side as she spoke as if dissuading a fly or gnat. “And that underbelly is as soft as it is pinched in.”

“I’m certainly better built now,” Ava agreed, squinting at the version of herself on the screen, then examining her own musculature. Her hands trailed along her stomach, knocking her knuckles against her abdomen as if feeling for the harder texture of muscle there. Borja couldn’t help but notice her arms were thicker now, too. “Did I really look like that?”

Fernando hesitated. Beside him, Quiet was staring at the screen impassively, apparently unaffected by the sight. (The next seat over, Connie was making an effort to do something of the same, though his gaze occasionally averted from the sight in clear discomfort.) Nando glanced from it to Ava. "...Yes."

"Stunning, and all the more now," Gonchi nodded decisively. "You look better every time I see you."

To Borja's surprise, the sharp one agreed with him. "You're gorgeous! There's so much skin! And your legs are longer than the rest of you, with so much meat on their bones! I bet they're a real tough cut!"

"Strong legs," Ave observed without further comment. Borja watched his eyes trail along her exposed collarbone and neck, expression devoid of the admiration or excitement expected from the rest of the room. Assessing. "It's not showing weakness, it's *showing off* all her best qualities. Trying to attract a mate."

"See, he gets it!"

Besides Ave, Paco and Ciro were doing as was socially correct and averting their eyes—Paco watching the room, though with more tension than Borja had, and Ciro simply staring at his hands folded into his lap. Winnie, sitting nearby the trio, elected to do a complete 180 degree turnaround and stare at the far wall.

"Beautiful," Plethora said.

Harri glanced at it for one second. Then he joined Tabi in staring at the ceiling. "Not my thing."

"That's rude to say!" Damiana, Borja was surprised to note, was as red as an ember.

"It's the truth!"

"Eh. Could keep them in the dark, or not. Either way," Cain said. Borja did note he wasn't taking his eyes off the screen, but was not surprised in the least. Of course he wasn't.

"She's gorgeous," Felipe said, and Borja turned to him sharply. "In a very different way from my beloved, but beautiful all the same."

"Why's her dress see-through?" Clara was more worried about other things.

Thelka, to Borja's surprise, was looking at the screen, intrigued. Almost... pleased.

Oh, it's you again. I've been hoping you'd find your way back here. Good to see that death doesn't stick for either of us. But no little knife this time, huh? Ugh. I hope you're not just here to 'chat.' I've been itching for a rematch.

Oli's face fell. "But I like to chat!"

Tabi blinked. "This is the least romantic greeting I've ever heard."

“You’re with Harri, though,” Connie commented. Harri looked unamused.

“It worked, though.”

- (Explore) I hope you heard all of that, Mr. Narrator. This is a lot different than last time, but last time definitely happened.
- (Explore) "You look... different."
- (Explore) "So you do remember me!"
- (Explore) "I actually am just here to chat."
- (Explore) "I'm not scared of you."
- (Explore) "I'm actually here to free you."
- (Explore) "I'm not saying I'm not here to fight, but I think the two of us have a few things to unpack first. Like how we're both still alive."
- (Explore) "I haven't decided what I'm doing yet."
- (Explore) "Don't worry, I'm always up for a good fight. In fact, the only reason I came down here without a weapon is because having a knife felt unfair."
- [Attack her unarmed.]
- "The blade's upstairs. I'll be right back." [Go upstairs and retrieve the blade.]
- "I don't know what happened to you since the last time we met, but I am not fighting a giant demon-lady. Bye!"
- [Turn around and leave without saying anything.]

Connie put a hand over his mouth, wheezing at the last option. “Can you imagine...?”

“You need a raise, Choicemaker.” Winnie said bluntly.

Harri blinked away from the screen before Quiet could answer. “We didn’t get paid. And I sure hope He heard all of that—”

“I-told-you-so-ing won’t do anything except turning Him against us.”

“Oh, that’s *rich* coming from you,” Ciro started, his voice filling the room instantly. Borja flinched from the volume. “You seemed plenty fine with it back with Winnie’s go of things!”

“Uh,” Oli stammered, “haha, that wasn’t *me*. That was some other type of me.”

“What does ‘me’ really mean, anyway?” Cain said, and was promptly ignored.

“Bullshit, that’s a convenient excuse,” Ciro responded, rolling on forward momentum. “Just because it *technically* didn’t happen doesn’t mean you wouldn’t have done it.”

“Well—”

“Our choices change us into who we become once they’re made. Making a choice is just as transformative as being subjected to a choice someone else makes; experience is just as capable of changing us as circumstance. Who you were is different from who you are, and who you are is different from who you will be; you’re still the same person, but you’re also different. Maybe you *would* make different choices, if you went back.”

Plethora's wisdom sucked all the conversation out of the room. Awkwardly, wordlessly, Oleander picked the option to tell the woman on the screen how different she looked.

- (Explore) "You look... different."

Aside from your empty hands, you look exactly the same.

"Finally! I thought it would never get said!" Tabi straightened as if possessed. "Wait, didn't Winnie say the decider in her go around was more or less her height?"

"Not what's important here."

"You're right; why are you just *glossing over* your entire body changing like that, Ava? Mine didn't, Dami's didn't," Tabi gestured to herself and her sister as she spoke, "what marks how some of us change versus how some of us don't?"

"I didn't have you two as a cross-reference," Ava said, crossing her arms. "Plus, it just *made sense* at the time."

"That you changed and he didn't?"

"I didn't want to think about stuff."

"Didn't want or *don't* want?" Tabi pressed, her tone cutting into dry deadpan.

"Didn't," Ava said after a pause. "It was difficult to think at all, back there."

Tabi blinked, then tapped Harri beside her. He started writing notes. "Difficult how?"

Ava groaned. "I don't know, like— like I had one goal and it was all I *had* to think about, and all the rest didn't matter. Like it was just me and him and us, and as long as that was the case I didn't *have* to concern myself with anything outside of that, and I *liked* it that way. It was simple. It was... stuck."

"We're able to think of new things now that we've seen things outside of us," Plethora agreed.

"I was able to think of new things pretty easily, myself," Connie said.

"It's certainly easier to come up with new things we could've tried when we're watching it from outside ourselves," Grace agreed. "Like... opening doors peacefully, or throwing knives out windows. Those things just didn't seem like options before. Even if... they *should've* been. We just didn't think of them."

"Did we 'just not think,' or were we thinking differently?" Tabi asked. She opened her mouth, apparently keen on answering her own question, then faltered. She looked lost.

"We *were* under a lot of pressure," Dami said. Tabi glanced to her, then nodded and settled down. Grace noncommittally examined her transparent hands, backs and palms, and shrugged.

Borja didn't understand what all the fuss was about. Every one of them had done their best with the situation they had woken up in, and it had been good outcomes. They'd just been screwed over at the very end by one singular party.

"Anyway," Ava said, pointing to the screen. "What is *her* problem?!"

"Whose problem?"

"*Her* problem!" Ava gestured at the screen.

"Then it should be 'my problem,'" Cain corrected.

"Don't give me that— I wouldn't have answered that way!" As Ava floundered, Oli clicked in preparation to advance back to the choice menu— and was interrupted.

The Narrator

All right. Fine. I believe you.

Voice of the Hero

What?

The Narrator

What you said earlier in the woods. I believe you. You've already met the Princess, and the Princess has already met you. But that's all the more reason to take this seriously. You don't know that whatever brought the two of you back to life isn't a fluke.

"So it is an alternate universe instead of rewinding the clock with our memories intact," Harri noted.

Tabi shoved his shoulder lightly. "I could've worked that out myself considering the metamorphosis we all go through, funnily enough."

"What if He has a point? What if it does have a limit?" Paco stressed, ignoring their commentary.

Clara shrugged. "I gave it my best shot and couldn't find this so-called limit."

Borja learned that, had Quiet managed to throw a knife in her chapter, Clara likely wouldn't have been able to dodge it. Not if she couldn't dodge a pillow thrown, predictably and with heavy windup, from one of Paco's trio— or the second pillow, thrown harder than the first.

The Narrator

And beyond that, do you know who doesn't remember anything that happened last time? Me. I. Don't. Remember.

Voice of the Hero

Are... are you okay?

The Narrator

Of course I'm not okay! As far as we're all concerned, the fate of my world is still very much on the line. Not all of us have the luxury of jumping over to a parallel universe the second we die.

"He doesn't sound okay," Damiana, bless her soul, fretted.

"Who cares?" said Cain and Gonchi together.

"Dami, I know it hurts you to see others hurting, but he wanted us all dead," Tabi reminded her gently.

"You can hold compassion for those who have wronged you," Borja corrected. "No matter what. You don't have to hate them."

"Such gentle living is the mark of a pure and honest heart! It's a saint's work to allow your heart to be a guiding light of morality in a world corrupted and concealed by darkness." Felipe said. "A world without that sort of radiant glow isn't a world worth fighting for."

- Just because it bothers you, I'm going to take this even less seriously. You don't know the depths of my apathy!
- (Lie) No. I don't know what you're talking about, I've never died. Do you see how alive I am right now? Would someone as alive as me already have died? I didn't think so.
- Don't worry. I'm going to do a good job!
- You got me. Pretty much everything you just said is true.
- [Remain silent.]

"Yes! The first one, do it!" Connie cackled. "I've never been more proud!"

Quiet, for some reason, seemed to sit up a little straighter at that. Connie leaned into its shoulder. Borja saw the way it leaned into him back, a short smile flickering onto its face. It was disgusting, how he enabled its bad behavior like that.

"No, I'm not pissing Him off on-purpose," Oleander said, much to Connie's disapproval if the heckling was any indication. He hovered the mouse over the second option near-instantly, then flinched, taking it back. "God, you are *so bad* at lying!"

Quiet's eyes flickered to Oli. "Try to lie to someone who's sharing headspace with you."

"I do it all the time." Oli paused, realizing how he just incriminated himself. "Or... *do I*? I'll never tell!"

"Lay off him, there's this thing known as being sarcastic."

Despite his best attempts at a facade, Borja found Oleander's uncertainty with his list of options rather open. The cursor flicked between them noncommittally, pausing on one just to

retract after a time too long to have spent *just* reading the line. He was evaluating each, and seemed not to like *any*. Having no good things to say, he eventually settled on saying nothing.

- [Remain silent.]

The Narrator

I'm going to take that silence as a sign that from this moment on, you're going to treat the task before you with utmost importance and seriousness. I'm so glad that we're finally all on the same page.

"Sure, keep telling yourself that," Connie laughed. Oli leaned, hunching in closer to the screen as if to block out the commentary of the room behind him.

- "I'm not saying I'm not here to fight, but I think the two of us have a few things to unpack first. Like how we're both still alive."

What is there to unpack? I was dead and now I'm not and the same goes for you. There. Unpacking done. Don't you get it? We've been given free reign to wail on each other forever.

Voice of the Stubborn

Couldn't have said it better myself.

"But..." Tabi sputtered. "*How?* Why?"

"The 'why' couldn't be more obvious," Gonchi said. "She said it herself. So we can fight forever."

"Okay, but— you *didn't*," Tabi stressed. "Because you're *not* fighting now. So that's clearly not right."

"Well... almost forever."

"I have never met someone so incurious in my life..." Harri muttered. "That's not the point, the point is to gather information, and we can't do that if we want to do the same thing as before."

"It's boring to retrace our steps," Cain agreed. "There are secrets waiting to be unraveled down new paths. And there are so many more threads to pull once you stop feeling."

- (Explore) "I actually am just here to chat."

Why? You didn't want to talk last time. Are you scared I'm going to kill you again?

Gonchi huffed. "Scared, me?"

"Why wouldn't you be?" Paco said.

"Why *would* you be? It didn't have any consequences the first time," Cain said.

“It hurt,” Nando disagreed. Cain hummed noncommittally in a way that had Borja suddenly seething. Of *course* it hurt. It could *only* hurt. That was the most natural statement in the world: dying hurts, being hurt is painful, it would be best to avoid both if at all possible.

“And it clearly changed things,” Tabi added. “even if it wasn’t you. The cabin and Ava both changed after you died.”

“We don’t necessarily *know* it’s our *death* that lets things change. Maybe it’s the world-hopping,” Harri said. “Maybe it’s her killing us, not necessarily us dying in general. Maybe it’s something about Him.”

“Exactly. There’s no need to rush to conclusions to confirm the same old biases,” Cain affirmed.

“Did you just say being scared of death is a *bias*?” Paco asked.

“Do pay attention.”

“Nobody *wants* to die,” Oli opined.

“Maybe. It depends. Either way, you don’t have to be scared of it,” Cain responded. “It’s going to happen no matter what. And, in this case... it doesn’t really have any consequences, does it?”

“No sensible creature *wants* a painful death,” Ave said, under his breath.

“I’m not letting us die here,” Oli said resolutely, then scrolled to the bottom of the options menu.

- "The blade's upstairs. I'll be right back." [Go upstairs and retrieve the blade.]

I'll be waiting.

“Oh you coward, I thought we were doing fisticuffs?”

“Nah,” Oli answered. Borja watched his foot bounce on the floor impatiently as the scene on the screen progressed.

The Narrator

You make your way back up the stairs to the cabin above. The Princess, surprisingly true to her word, lets you leave. The blade remains where you left it on the wrought-iron altar.

Voice of the Stubborn

Great. Now pick it up and march back down there. I'm tired of us constantly moving in circles instead of fighting her like we're supposed to.

- (Explore) "You know, we could just stay here. Who says we have to fight to the death?"
- [Take the blade from the altar.]

Oli blinked, cursor flicking between the two options rapidly. “Uh?”

“Isn’t that interesting?” Cain said, leaning forward in his seat. He glanced, minutely, to where Ava sat beside Borja and Felipe. “I wonder what she’ll do if we don’t give her what she wants?”

“That’s bullshit,” Gonchi huffed like a toddler throwing a tantrum, “she’s waiting for us.”

“It’s just an Explore option,” Harri noted. “It should just open more options, right? It’s not like we’re committing to anything.”

“Not what I was intending, but...” Oli’s voice seemed a bit strained.

“So you did want to commit?” Cain asked.

Oli did not answer.

- (Explore) “You know, we could just stay here. Who says we have to fight to the death?”

Voice of the Stubborn

Me. I say that.

The Narrator

Staying up here doesn't solve anything. All it does is kick the can down the road. If you don't deal with her now, she will find a way a out.

Voice of the Hero

Those doors are made of stone and she's still in chains. She's strong, yeah, but is she break-her-chains-and-smash-through-stone strong?

Voice of the Stubborn

Wouldn't it be exciting if she was?

Connie choked. “That’s quite a tone in your voice!”

Gonchi glanced at Connie as if he were the weird one. “Yeah? I like it when she’s strong. When she shows me just how strong she can be.”

“Holy *shit*, ” Connie breathed, his voice shaking a little from how hard he was holding himself back.

Voice of the Hero

Here's another idea. What if we just leave?

Oli visibly slumped with relief. “*Thank you*, Nando. Finally, a *reasonable* suggestion!”

Contrary to what Borja had been expecting, Nando didn't look pleased by that. If anything, he tensed more. How odd. Usually Fernando took to even the slightest hint of praise like a sponge to water, and this was the kind of flattery that would usually leave him something between flustered and charmed. Why would this leave him almost afraid? Yes, it *was* the coward's way out, after Ava had explained what she wanted so clearly. But Nando looked like he expected more than his pride to be jeopardized in the coming seconds.

The Narrator

Absolutely not. If you leave, she'll leave, and that'll be the end of everything as we know it.

- [Take the blade from the altar.]
- "We're doing it. We're staying up here."
- "We're leaving."

The options were presented. In the instant between one moment and the next, Oli clicking the final option to leave like it'd been all he was hoping to do from the moment he entered the cabin, Nando spoke, his voice stressed and quick, but not quick enough.

"I don't think that's a good—"

I'm tired of waiting. You thought you could just leave me down there, didn't you? But I can feel you trembling on the other side of this door. There's nowhere left for you to run.

Do you think this door is enough to hold me? You're not getting out of this. I don't care how many things I have to break. I'm getting the fight I want.

"Yes there is. The door. Open the door," Paco said.

"The windows," Connie said. "They don't even have glass!"

The banging continued. Connie's voice got smaller. "Anywhere that isn't here."

Those last two options, Borja recognized, would necessitate that Quiet — for *any* amount of time — walk in the direction of the banging. Maybe, it didn't move because it was scared of what was causing the banging. Maybe, it didn't move because it knew that was what it deserved.

The Narrator

The entire cabin shakes as the Princess throws herself against the basement door.

"Run." Ave hissed, coiled up as if to do the same.

Borja turned to Quiet expectantly. It was rooted in place, almost as if it were frozen, the trembling of its hands barely noticeable from across the room. Fernando leaned to it and murmured something and it did not move. He reached up as if to tap it on the shoulder and it did not move, nor did it move when he paused in the movement and retracted his hand, glancing at his palms. He said something, again, and Borja caught it only because he was thinking the same. "Quiet, you're trembling."

Somehow, it froze worse. And Nando flinched back from the sudden stillness as if burned by his own words.

His hands hovered uselessly in the air around it. Borja wanted him to back away further. It deserved to watch this uninterrupted, without distractions. In lieu of giving it space, Borja decided that now would be a good time to press in closer.

(Expectation) Pay attention.

Voice of the Hero

W-we're fine... right?

Voice of the Stubborn

If we had a weapon we'd be fine.

The Narrator

Yes, you should probably pick up the blade, shouldn't you?

Voice of the Hero

I know I'd feel a lot safer with it.

“No, you should run!”

“Why isn't he running?”

“Something's wrong,” Harri said almost to himself.

The Narrator

But before you can act, another impact shakes the cabin, a massive gash splitting its way up the stone doors.

Voice of the Stubborn

Here she comes.

The door on the screen exploded, the stone fracturing like ceramics into jagged diamond shapes. It hit the ground and broke further, smashed into smaller pieces until all that was left was rubble and dust.

Quiet *flinched*.

A *real* flinch. Not a startle, not a jump. The kind of flinch the others knew from Paco, when someone tried to touch him in their first few days or weeks of living before they knew he hated it like death; the kind of flinch from Ciro that launched punches and kicks so hard they left bruises out of nowhere, with no tangible trigger; the kind of flinch Borja, himself, experienced from time to time when his goddess prepared a lesson— or when, in the times

between their first and latest meeting, a noise a bit too loud hit his ears and he hit the floor. The kind of flinch from certain others in certain circumstances, circumstances that felt like dying.

It ducked its head low, curling in its entire body and flinging itself backwards in its seat, nearly toppling itself over from the force. In the fetal position, still trembling, it curled impossibly tighter in to protect its vitals from the threat. Its muscles locked in place a few times, deliberately stilling its movements, trapped in position and waiting... for blows that did not come.

It stilled, not locking up but instead coming, quietly, to the realization that nothing had happened quite yet. Slowly, its head raised from its cage of a body.

The room was rather still. Watching it.

Borja wondered if it would have looked like that, before, if Felipe *did* find it.

Fernando was the first person it locked eyes with, him having startled back a few inches on the couch to give it space and tucked his hands at his back. Now he, funnily enough, wasn't moving, either. Now *his* hands were shaking.

He opened his mouth. A pathetic, tiny, strangled sound escaped before he closed up again.

Borja couldn't blame him for the reluctance to approach. For a split second, it almost looked like it was flinching back from *him*.

The Narrator

The doors explode outwards, shards of stone clattering against the walls as the Princess emerges from the basement.

At the sound of the Narrator's voice, Quiet blinked, regaining the slightest hint of clarity as its gaze flicked back to the screen, then swept across the rest of the room. Expressions of horror, for the lot of them. Borja didn't even need to put much thought into analyzing the gesture or its expression — he was well-versed in the language of apologies.

Borja could have gone his entire life without seeing the chimera smile. "As she should. She's hungry, and you ran."

At Borja's side, Ava had never seemed so... stuck. All of her was still. Unnervingly so.

On the screen, however, was a sharp juxtaposition. *That* Ava stood proudly, without even the slightest hint of doubt in her frame, her powerful legs stood straight and her arms hanging on the doorframe she towered in height above. Her expression was sour. Borja expected her tone of voice to follow.

(Expectation) (Pressure) Listen.

After everything we've been through, I can't believe this is going to end with you cowering in a corner. You're pathetic.

A sharp intake of breath, from multiple sources. Nando's hand darted to grasp Quiet's, Connie staring at it like he didn't know what to say.

Ciro, for his part, had rounded on Ava. "What is WRONG with you?!"

(Confirmation) She's right.

Was it possible to get pins-and-needles from something that didn't truly exist? His thread was flickering in place, tugged left, right, center, phantom pains accompanying it. Pushed and pulled from pressures and tensions layering over one another.

"I wouldn't say that!" Ava whispered in the silence that followed. "You know I don't think that, right?"

Quiet wasn't going to hear that.

(Denial) She doesn't mean it. (Pressure) Everyone knows what you are.

It's time that you did, too.

Voice of the Hero

We're doomed.

(Pressure) (Intent) You're powerless. Never forget this.

The Narrator

In a fit of violence, the Princess explodes across the room and closes the gap between you.

The sharp one whistled in blatant admiration at the sight on the screen.

The chimera was grinning. "There she goes."

Something lit up, a sensation of pressure around him and a snapping wire, and Borja felt phantom pain from a hundred wounds he'd never bore. So, it was remembering too. He could feel its heart opening, its self starting to sink down, its being unraveling before him. He caught the threads as they tangled, sight drawn away from the unspooling to how its threads wrapped around his fingers.

(Catharsis) (Comfort) It's alright. (Compassion) (Care) You know you deserve this.

Only...

He blinked as the screen changed, as he could see more. He could feel the words before they were spoken, and the impressions they were sure to leave. He pressed into Quiet the importance of listening to the pain instead of fighting it, this time.

(Care) (Intent) I'll be here if you need me.

Something caught, the thought skipping and repeating itself, an echo filtering through his connection, distorting under the refraction and recollection. He didn't pay it mind. Some things had to break in order to be built back up again. He was living proof of that.

The Narrator

She is merciless. With every blow comes a bloom of fresh pain, igniting nerves you didn't know you even had, your skin bruising and splitting and bleeding as her fists rain down relentlessly. But thankfully, you won't have to bear this agony for much longer. Your body has its limits, and she has found them.

Absently, he wondered, once more, if what he was seeing on the screen would have happened with Felipe. In a manner of speaking.

He had expected Felipe would find Quiet. He'd expected that he'd rough it up a bit, scare it straight, teach it some lessons in humility and the consequences of aspiring to a purpose and authority higher than your birthright.

Quiet needed to remember how it could be hurt. That way it could remember how the pain of vulnerability both taught and healed, too. Borja could approach it after Felipe wore it down. Bring it to its senses. Bring it to his new abode. Thelka would take care of the rest, he was sure. She was wise, wiser than him, than any of them. She'd know how to reinstate the natural order and get things to how they should be. She could get to Quiet. He knew She could. She did, back then. Get it to understand how it had to go back.

He glanced up to Thelka. She smiled at him, her fingers grazing his head as she gestured to the screen. Wasn't it nostalgic, watching this? Didn't it feel nice to reminisce about their first meeting, how She'd proven Herself his rightful owner, how She'd taken his heart and crushed it in Her warm, soft hands? How their connection, pale and glowing with holy light, had woven its way into his soul and burned him away into Her perfect instrument?

His thread to her, at the end of the day, was the only one he needed. Far more beautiful and pure than any of the others, diluted and dark with color intermixed like imperfect blemishes on blackstone. As if in recognition of his appraisal, an ugly burnt orange flickered hastily through the spiraling threads. *Well— burnt sienna—* no, Borja doubled back, "ugly orange" was the right descriptor.

Quiet had one like Borja's, too. It wasn't his fault it couldn't see it wrapped snugly around its neck.

Voice of the Stubborn

I hate this.

The Narrator

With your body a shapeless pulp, her fingers wrap around what's left of your neck.

You disgust me.

Clearly, time spent away from Her hadn't done Quiet good. And seeing how it was almost completely wrapped in the others' threads, he could see why. It cowered from the screen like an infant, huddling with those who chose to settle next to it and covered further by a nasty tangle of interwebbed strings so dark they were almost black, yet iridescent like glass. They had been babying it for too long.

They weren't even speaking amongst each other anymore, all the air in the room sucked out and diverted towards it. And it was wasting their efforts. It wasn't even breathing properly, shallow and weak. It was clamouring for yet more attention, never satisfied with what it had been given. The others' care was being exploited and wasted on something that didn't even bother to show appreciation for it. And yet, despite how little it deserved them, they held it closer.

They had even gotten some of the women into it, threads dangling from Ava's horns, tying off Dami's braid (the same thread between them both, lit up the same color of fresh blood), weaving through Winnie's flowers, around Tabi's shoulders.

The Narrator

Her grip hardens, and you feel a horrific pop in your neck. She releases you, your numb body crumpling to the stone floor as your vision starts to fade.

Borja only had to make use of his thread, spiraling from on high, up and around the others' and threading the needle down through them, and manage to convince Quiet to listen to him once more, the way it should have all along.

Voice of the Hero

I guess I'll see you all next time... I can say that now, right? We're dead?

Voice of the Stubborn

Great. I can't wait to be stuck in this useless body all over again.

Ciro choked. "You—!" He didn't finish the thought. Strange. But the Stubborn on the screen was right.

The Narrator

I won't be seeing you, but I suppose something like me will. Everything goes dark, and you die.

It didn't have to hurt so much. Quiet could've just chosen to listen to him. But it didn't. Those were its own choices; that wasn't Borja's fault. It just needed to be retaught— why were the others looking at him like that...?

They had turned at some point, each of them, from their doting concern for Quiet's wellbeing, then onto him. A dripfeed of focus and intent as one, then three heads turned, and then all of them did at once. Their expressions— some utterly unreadable yet pervasive in their stillness, some trembling with an inner rage it couldn't help but spill out like molten

glass into their glossy eyes, some with masks of pleasantries cracked open by sheer shock—all carried the same look in the eyes, the same setting of the mouth, the same raw feeling bore into them and into him through them.

It was not a tangled mass of thread. It was shining multicolor like spun from jewels, a networked web of nerves and glass and spider silk, each of its strands turned towards him, nine gazes tuned into the windows to his soul and each of them expressing...

(Disgust) (Shock) (Rage)

(Derision) I think he can hear us now, lads.

That came from a thread lit up blue, like the sky, at the same time his heart sank. A familiar voice. A familiar disdain for Borja in his tone. Fernando could never let Borja do anything.

In response to the previous, another thread came alive, forest green spreading like moss through its pulse. Whispery with a certain sharp inflection, soft yet pointed. Its signature faded as subtly as it showed.

(Clarity) We heard plenty. We've just been quiet.

Borja felt the pressure of their eyes on him, the implications of their attention sinking in. A thread floated out from the crowd, shimmering flecks of gold sparkling in the movement. Its owner's voice was scratchy, the texture of its thoughts worn from great use.

(Warning) (Pride) You shouldn't make assumptions about things you don't know for certain.

The next sounded like it was muffled, like coming from behind a barrier, though the *burnt*—no, *burnt sienna*—that one was stuck—the *burnt sienna* rang clear through the words.

(Recognition) Remember, boys, we have (Reminder) (Caution) 'company.'

But it *was* an ugly orange. Borja would be damned before he let Oleander infect his vocabulary with a color name so pretentious.

The next thought impressed into Borja's connected psyche was *loud* and run through with electric blue.

(Offense) (Mockery) 'No one listens' to you, huh?

Its vocal quality was nasally, almost shrill, with a certain tremble as if the words were spoken on a precipice between a yell and a growl.

The quotation of his own train of thought continued in blood red, from a gruff voice that Borja knew the inflection of all too clearly from getting to know it from the screen and speakers. He seemed intent to match the color of his thread to Borja, somehow and in some way.

(Malice) He 'needs to remember how he can be hurt', I see how it is.

(Correction) No. Not 'he,' he said... (Tension) 'It?'

That one was *agony* in purple. Whatever high tones Borja had become used to hearing from Connie were absent.

...he would be killed if he continued his train of thought, he was suddenly certain. Maybe not immediately. But it felt like a promise. One that he wasn't sure to risk the thought that his Goddess would stop them.

One of them, some of them, tensed their muscles as if to stand. Not a promise then, a split second warning.

How appropriate, then, that the name that lit up the screen was **The Fury**.

Chapter End Notes

Dua: someone said they wanted to rage, we just granted their wish. This was as hard for us to write as it was for you to read through, promise.

overthink_it: reading through the commentary, it seems the most common statement was that there was balancing error with the last chapter. too much comfort and fluff. the people were wondering, demanding, even, where the angst and the hurt had gone.

luckily, such an egregious issue is now being alleviated. thank you for your patience as we turn the blender on max

Chapter 17: ¿Hay alguien ahí?

Chapter Summary

Worlds collide and blood runs together. A question is asked. Answers repeat, tangle, writhe, give out and fracture like interlocking fingers; a single answer, woven in thread, and reviewed in a greater tapestry. The threads intersect at redundant connections. Nets hold strong under great weight. The whole is maintained even when pieces fail, and the holes are sewn up with new material.

Chapter Notes

This fic has fanart! Feast upon it!

[Here's Borja being himself, by PureAsSalt](#)

[An attempt to a family picture, also by PureAsSalt](#) and also [colored by me, Dua](#).

Was told the names were confusing if they were at the end so here they are, at the beginning!

Broken - Borja

Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi

Cold - Caín

Contrarian - Connie

Hunted - Avellano/Ave

Opportunist - Oleander/Oli

Paranoid - Paco

Cheated - Ciro

Hero - Fernando/Nando

Smitten - Felipe

Skeptic - Harrier/Harri

Prisoner - Tabi/Tabitha

Damsel - Dami/Damiana

Witch - Winnie/Winifred

Tower - Thelka

Adversary - Ava

Nightmare - Clara

Spectre - Grace

Stranger - Plethora

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Had he ever done anything right?

In the pitifully small range of infinity he knew he'd experienced, the few suggestions he'd made or the few opinions he'd held were either completely ignored or, when followed, led to more pain and suffering than anything he could have possibly imagined.

With the chimera, he'd done nothing but panic and watched as Ave assisted Quiet better than he ever could, with an understanding of their body and its senses than any of them could achieve. His suggestion to fight back nearly killed them. He'd nearly told them to kill themselves in its stomach, if just the pain would end faster, if just so she wouldn't get what she wanted by hurting them, only for their begging and pleading to win out and save them at the very last second.

Quiet did kill himself at his suggestion, once. One of their deaths was explicitly, obviously, unavoidably his own fault. He could not blame anyone else for it, for Grace was only just slain and had not yet revived, and Cain had not yet finished hatching. He did not know, ultimately, what was left for Quiet had he let them live in that empty cabin; he only had the belief that the Narrator was lying when He said they were happy, that Quiet was just as unhappy with the arrangement as he was, and that they trusted him when he said they'd come back.

With Damiana, it wasn't bad enough that he kept doubting her, but his explicit suggestion made everything spiral out of control and got both of them hurt. He refused to entertain thoughts otherwise. Not when it was a pattern that'd repeated three times over.

With Clara— everything *about* Clara, really. He told them to stay and things got worse, and when they did, he couldn't do anything about it. Paco helped them and he couldn't do anything beyond accept that help, beyond depend on it. Even when he tried to relieve Paco of the burden of controlling the nervous system, he was beyond any shadow of a doubt horrible at it.

He considered, with the facts laid out in front of him, that had he been listened to when he was ignored, it seemed likely that those paths were worse than the ones that were decided on. He'd only seen one path yet that differed from Quiet's that led to a more positive outcome, and even then, his throat had to be slit to achieve it. Insofar as Fernando was concerned, the paths he saw Quiet take with his own... perspective, were the best and safest paths he could've taken.

And now, his suggestion to leave that cursed cabin had ended with Quiet being slowly beaten to death, with his screen-self able to see it coming and staying silent for most of it. With the grand potential of infinity hanging like a sword above his head, he could only imagine himself doing everything wrong.

He clearly was making everything worse; his best bet going forward was that he should pull away, should do everything else in his power to ensure their safety... but his thread had other ideas. It wouldn't budge. Traitorously, it seemed, for all the time he spent requiring he do better to protect him, it had only curled around him tighter.

Quiet wasn't letting go of it, either. That must mean he wanted Nando near. He'd said he was proud of him even after knowing everything Nando did, all the things Nando himself didn't know. But.

Quiet told them about a handful of eternities with her, excusing her in his next breath. He'd told them being manhandled, hurt, *killed*, was okay, because it was *him*. If what Gonchi had told Nando was any indication, he'd been waiting, expecting even, to be hurt for the slightest misstep. The extent, the proportion of that retaliation, apparently, didn't matter. If Quiet thought he provoked it, if he thought he 'deserved' it, then everything to follow was his fault and had to be accepted as the consequences of his actions. Even when he hadn't done *anything at all*.

What metric was it, all things considered, that Quiet wanted Nando near, that Quiet felt safe near him? Quiet never got to know what being safe *was*. Quiet didn't know how to identify who was safe and who was bad for him.

(Nando *wanted* to be safe for him. But he couldn't trust his own intuition, so how could he trust himself to be what Quiet needed? How could he trust that *he* wasn't bad for him?)

He could only hope the others would reign him in, if he accidentally hurt Quiet again. Because Nando couldn't pull away, not by himself, his thread proved that.

Worse, even, was the way Quiet was outside the screen, because of his suggestion. How he had been on the verge of falling apart. How he would have, if it wasn't for everyone else. How he couldn't keep him together on his own. How Borja was pushing him over the edge and had been from the beginning.

How he wanted to tear Borja apart with his bare hands.

Luckily, he wasn't alone in thinking that. Conversation flowed around him as he listened without ears. It was almost nostalgic, listening to the others, talking without a mouth.

It was a novelty, even now, that they were all in agreement about something.

[Righteousness] (Irony) 'No one listens to him.' Oh, I'd listen to him, alright. I'd listen to him. How about he tries remembering how he can be hurt? Prick thinks he's above it all, thinks he's better than us the moment he has an ounce of control? I'll listen to him fucking scream.

*[Rebellion] (Disgust) 'It.' The sad and mopey one calls **Quiet** 'it?' While he's the one kneeling to a phony god? Someone's projecting!*

[Terror] His heart beats faster under certain circumstances, with certain cues. He has to be afraid of something. He has to have a weakness. I wonder if I can stop his lungs, and then—

(Malice) (Bloodlust) Start with a punch to the center of the spine. Maybe a blow to the solar plexus. Crush the bones in my hands. It'll feel nice to listen to them snap. Break his legs — first the fibula, then the tibia, then finally his femurs. Then break his ribs. Start from the

bottom or work my way up? I'd have to be careful not to puncture the lungs. Then slowly crush his skull until the light drained from his eyes, and—

[Calculation] (Correction) That's not right — Smee would never let you close enough. Rewind. Rework. Shadows are tricky.

(Annoyance) Start with a blow—

[Instinct] (Rage) Aim for the head.

[Thirst] (Correction) Center-mass shots are more effective.

*(Anger) (Heat) I want him to burn. To blister. To feel his skin bubble and welt and char until it feels like he's been dipped in hellfire, for a crime that he doesn't even consider as such and then I'll watch his flesh boil, and then he'll understand what exactly is that he did how dare he howdarehe **HOWDAREHE**—*

He was distantly aware of his surroundings as it were. Dami was crying, so silently Nando hadn't noticed at first, any sound that could have escaped muffled to nonexistence by Gonchi's chest. None of his bloodthirsty monologue was reflecting on how he spoke to her, or how he sought Ava's eyes with something bordering on desperation.

She wasn't meeting his, staring at her hands like she could see Quiet's blood on them, ignoring Razor and Thelka's comments of approval, of advice— as if this were nothing more than a performance, as if Quiet was nothing of consequence. Not that he wanted them to notice Quiet. God...

Borja, he could tell, was half-terrified, half trying to make Felipe stay in his seat. It was clear how badly the latter wanted to go check on Dami. Tabi was on that already, talking to her. There was something waxy about her complexion— maybe she couldn't handle the violence as well as she'd thought.

(Compulsion) It's a short walk to the kitchen, and a brief search for a knife. It wouldn't be very hard at all to slit his throat, a matter of seconds at most.

Cain, from what Nando could tell, wasn't chatting with the rest of the flock. Those almost felt like directions. But something, suddenly, was pressing against him, chill and fog and breath down his neck and a sweeping sensation of blind focus settling into him. And...

(Curiosity) What did he do to us, again?

...Nando blinked, struggling for words. The breath crept up his neck into his head, through hollow bones, slipped into his skull. He felt... odd, for a moment, and then the cold pulled away—pulled closer, around. Hung around his neck and shoulders, pushing him down with phantom weight, pressing in on him. A blank cradle around his spirit. What just...?

[Sincerity] (Confusion) What did you just do?

Hm.

He drifted. Nando breathed in, deeply, trying to ground himself. His breath felt cold in his mouth, throat, lungs; it smelled like mist and unbroken silences, tasted like an unspoken understanding. Another few breaths and it didn't feel like anything. An acceptance.

(Amusement) We could puncture his lungs, too, if we had more time. Or perhaps he'd struggle against us like we did him. It wouldn't matter. Our will is much stronger than his. But it could be fun to do to him what he tried to do to us, only better.

(Certainty) We're better at killing than he is, clearly.

It was a tempting thought. A bit of poetic justice, some fitting karma. If anything, the insane and indulgent nature of it at least made the prior idea seem more reasonable. It did sound simple, when he put it like that. Nando wasn't one for hurting people if it could be helped, usually, but it sounded so easy.

(Agreement) He's been asking for it.

[Sincerity] (Contemplation) He has, hasn't he?

(Purpose) Now you're getting it.

It was a calming thought. His hands, now that he was looking at them, weren't shaking like they were before. He wasn't feeling any sort of jitter, either, none of the burning in his chest or behind his eyes. He turned the idea in his head once or twice, focusing on it and feeling it settle into him. At the end of the day, it really was just that easy; Borja didn't have to be a problem if he didn't want him to be. It felt empowering.

Nando flexed his hands once or twice. He couldn't really feel anything, not the tension on his skin at least. Was he supposed to? He hadn't really given much thought to the absence before. He tapped his left palm with his right fingers, and that felt. This was probably normal, then.

He blinked. He really needed to regain his bearings. He should—

(Compulsion) Go to the kitchen.

He considered getting up. A change in rooms would help. Then startled, when he realized Cain was still talking to him. He thought the conversation was done. He must've missed the first half of what he said.

Nando glanced at Quiet beside him. *Warmth.* He felt fuzzy.

It's an easy job. (Appeal) It's even the moral thing to do.

(Rejection) (Priority) There's more important things to take care of.

He took a breath and found the air oddly warm. His palms were clammy. He swallowed. It was a nice thought, but a selfish one, as were most of his thoughts involving Quiet as of late. A vindictive revenge fantasy wasn't going to solve the real problem here. Quiet had been listening to Borja for what felt like hours. If even a single thing managed to stick, it was one thing too many. He needed to remind Quiet that those things were lies.

I suppose you're right. (Amusement) He is quite insignificant, isn't he?

There was a lilt in Cain's tone at the end there. Nando smiled despite himself.

The weight of Cain's attention, forgotten until then, lifted — and with it, the ambient temperature of the room returned to Nando as he shivered the rest of the cold away. His mouth felt dry.

What had he almost done?

He wanted to protect Quiet, but he could do that without putting himself at risk like that.

It wasn't like he could leave him— his thread made him root in place at the mere thought. He couldn't afford even one more mistake. He had already made Quiet flinch back from him. No, that wasn't right. Quiet hadn't flinched back from him; the exact opposite, he'd stayed in place. Locked in place. Because Nando had told them they were trembling.

"He thinks you're upset with him," a whispery, feminine voice told him. Grace? Nando blinked, searching for her, the source of the sound indistinct. It felt like she was all around him. Or was he all around her? That didn't make sense. *"Sh. You're all pretty loud, you know?"*

Nando blinked.

(Uncertainty) You can hear us?

"You're too close beside me not to." He felt... something, travel down his thread and up his spine, like a shiver. He watched a gentle mist pervade out from Quiet's skin like sweat, the pale air only barely visible, dissipating as quickly as it drifted out. Ah.

(Concern) Is he okay? With you?

"I wouldn't be here if he hadn't asked."

Right. He knew that. Grace had waited for Quiet to agree before the possession, last time. But it never felt like a waste to ask.

(Curiosity) What does he feel like?

"I thought you knew? You were here before me. I had to twist my way past you to get here." Again, another shiver rippled through him. He felt it tingle on his skin from the inside. Now that he was paying attention, he couldn't stop noticing it; she felt close. *"You'll have to loosen up a bit before I can pull out, you know."*

(Realization) Why can't he hear us? (Worry) Why would I be upset with him?

Quiet exhaled roughly, mist billowing out from his mouth and nose as he shivered deeply. Nando almost jumped when his thread started humming with feeling, distorted as it was. It didn't feel like him—more like something was overflowing and passing through him from an external source.

(Distortion) (Fury) (Concern)

“No good reason,” Grace said, her voice a low hiss like steam. The feedback between the layered connection was giving Nando something like a headache. The fury definitely was Grace. Nando couldn’t tell where the concern was coming from. “There are... rules, Quiet followed, with Her. He thought he messed up. He thought he was going to be punished for shaking ‘while She’s working.’”

(Shock) (Haste) (Correction)

*“Oh, not ‘punished.’ She doesn’t believe in that word. There’s only ‘action and reaction,’ a series of cause and effect. Well, **She** isn’t here! She will never be here! We left her!”*

Nando stamped down hard on his own rage; he didn’t need to scare Quiet more than he already had. From how the temperature of Nando’s thread was dropping, it seemed Grace had it covered, anyway.

He leaned towards Quiet, to his dull grey eyes, trying to catch any sign of life in his expression. Nothing to see. Distant. Hazy. Tentatively, he reached and tapped their shoulders and tried not to flinch back— or pull them closer— at how their body temperature had lowered with Grace’s presence. They did not feel dead, but they certainly felt cold. He thought, for a brief second, that he should get them a blanket before he remembered how little sense that made and how it wouldn’t work if the source of cold was inside them. And they weren’t even upset with the arrangement, anyway.

He cleared his throat for the same old practiced question. “Hey. Still with me?”

A distressing silence.

“He hears you,” Grace commented. Nando decided not to question how she knew that. “He’s sorry for flinching. He says he didn’t mean to upset anyone.”

Nando didn’t even know what to address first. He wasn’t upset, Quiet didn’t need to apologize for a completely natural reaction, Nando had to make sure Borja hadn’t left his mark...

(Constriction) It feels... (Comfort) (Care) (Concern) ...

(Curiosity) ...What’s happening out there?

“You can come out and see for yourself,” Grace commented under Quiet’s breath. “They miss you.”

There was the slightest change in the air, like the first breath after surfacing from a frozen pond, like ice melting in the sunlight, cooled and warmed at once in just such a way that the temperature barely shifted. It was just enough to get comfortable, but barely changed, in the way one adjusts their resting position in bed without significant movement. In it, perhaps, there was the slightest tension of a morning stretch. An adjustment to the waking world.

(Contentment) (Nostalgia) Just like old times.

Fernando tried very hard not to let his relief show.

(Relief) Yeah. It is, isn't it?

He failed miserably. He wasn't really even sure why he tried. Especially not when he felt Quiet's consciousness, for lack of better words, lean into him.

(Surprise) Um.

Nando had almost forgotten about all the others, so deep was his focus. Most of the others were still upset about what had happened on the screen, Borja, or both. Mostly both. He was the same, even without Cain's interference.

Gonchi was the first to realize Quiet was back, something impressive to note given he was still going. Nando watched red wrap around and around once more, erratic and spiraling in time with his thoughts.

(Bloodlust) He'll be unrecognizable, a mass of blood and bone and splattered on the walls and coating my fists...

Ciro followed in electric blue, curling tight, disturbingly calm for the man saying it.

(Reassurance) Don't worry, we'll make him hurt for what he said to you.

Dizzying in its speed, Ave's thread rushed by in forest green.

(Instinct) Drag him out. Isolate him from the herd. He's weak when he's alone. (Compassion) Words mean nothing in isolation, and all he has is words.

(Objection) True words.

He could feel the flock moving to press in on that, threads smothering together as one as if to put out a fire or to cradle a casualty. The words that the individuals impressed blurred together into one cacophony, one sentiment; it was radiant and burning and shimmering at the edges like a prism refracted light.

(Offense) (Overrule) (Truth)

There were no words to describe the message. Not from the whole flock, brimming with murder, boiling over in protective rage. Perhaps a singular word, like 'Wrong,' could get close, but close was not correct.

One thread separated itself from the others and wrapped around to dig into Quiet's back. Nando caught a flicker of burnt sienna, but with the distance, he could not sense its message.

Quiet sat up in his seat, Nando's heart rising with him. He scanned the room a moment, gray eyes settling into green not far from the computer that Oleander had put himself in a rush to remove himself from. Those eyes bore into him a moment, then crinkled unexpectedly.

(Gratitude) (Sincerity) Thanks, Oli.

(Welcome) Glad to have you back, boss!

(Bewilderment) Since when were you talking? I didn't hear a thing you said.

(Satisfaction) That's the idea! (Conspiracy) We haven't heard a word from the persona non grata. Pretty slick, eh? Eh?

(Sincerity) You are doing great.

Nando briefly made out something like *(Shock)* before he felt something like a door close—an unrestricted airflow being blocked—and watched as Oli's thread frantically pulled away.

[Rebellion] (Offense) He talked about you like you weren't a person. There's nothing worth it in what he said.

(Familiarity) I'm not.

Nando seized his thread. It felt automatic.

(Urgency) No. (Reminder) You have a name. People have names.

(Correction) I have a name now.

(Persistence) So, 'now,' you're a person!... (Reminder) And we called you a name before you picked one out, 'Decider.'

[Boldness] (Assertion) He was 'Decision-maker' to me.

[Instinct] (Distinction) I went with 'Chooser.'

(Correction) Those are titles. But it's okay, I'm fine with it.

Harri's thread straightened at once. It shot through the current extremely frustrating back-and-forth like an arrow.

(Frustration) If a person is 'a single set of eyes witnessing from one perspective' —

(Panic) Where did—?

(Focus) (Clarity) — then you are exactly that. You've only ever been one person.

(Recollection) (Counter) And if having a 'title' instead of a 'name' means you weren't, then, Hell, none of us were people until very recently. Me least of all, since I was last. (Tangent) Not to get into how the hell you differentiate between a 'title' and a 'name' anyway.

(Focus) (Clarification) I don't follow that logic. I don't think you do, either. It's a poorly crafted argument, and we're both smarter than that. (Conclusion) I think you're just making up petty excuses to keep believing a stupid lie.

You're not getting it. Back then, all I was was a body. A vessel, if you will. Is that clear enough for you?

Cold dread. Nando wasn't particularly fond of Quiet's choice of words. Even less so if they were deliberate. Still, he could practically hear the grin in Harri's words even when he wasn't facing them

(Giddiness) (Victory) Not at all. To be a vessel, you'd need something to fill you, and you've always been just you. Checkmate.

Not quite. (Affection) (Nostalgia) You were all with me. How about... I was a 'marionette?'

(Contentment) (Nostalgia) And my strings returned to me. (Peace) I'm back where I belong.

Nando felt Quiet relaxing against the threads, sinking against him for a moment. It felt like a surrender. Of what, to what, Nando wasn't sure. He felt like he was falling. There was a tightness in his chest. *Horror* spread through him. Whose was it?

Still huddled between them both, he could just barely hear Grace's mutter of "*not this again.*"

*(Acceptance) I'm a body that houses the rest of you. When you **really** want something, you pull my strings.*

Ciro jumped out of his seat and marched, very determinedly, to the computer seat, muttering to himself and exhaling like an angry animal. "—I'll show you—..."

Quiet gave the mental equivalent of a wince.

[Cold] (Passivity) I've never made you do anything you didn't want to do yourself.

*(Warmth) **You** haven't. Nando hasn't either.*

*(Interjection) For the record, I haven't, either, boss. (Pleasantries) I am all for the mutually-beneficial power structure we've got going on here. With **you** on top! And us little guys duking it out underneath.*

Beneath Quiet's skin, Grace's presence permeated out, a harsh mist pushing out into the open air of the room. It was gentle and it was apparent. She spoke louder than she had before and Nando felt her voice in his chest. It pressed against him like it was stretching against his incidental hold. "*We both know that's not true, chilly.*"

(Surprise) (Fear) ¿Que carajo?

Surprisingly enough, Ciro was the only one not reacting to Grace. That was apparent as soon as the world came back into focus and Nando saw... saw... that was not a path in the woods.

A world of melted flesh. Trees, or what passed for them, of what looked like boney fingers with sharp fingernails, grew roots of veins snaking through the ground made of meat, sloughing off the base of each 'tree'. Some had flaps of skin acting as foliage, dripping and

tearing. Cysts and tumors grew, pulsing, from the 'soil' like underbrush. The sky looked swollen with something, dropping down and about to burst.

Dami sprung up from her seat, almost dragging Gonchi with her. She paused, as if trying to formulate a verbal excuse, swaying on her feet. Her face rapidly paled, glimmering with nauseous sweat. Slapping a hand over her mouth, she darted away from the others and stumbled hastily into the kitchen. Nando could identify the sounds following her retreat. It sounded like a forceful expulsion, ugly and undignified and gruesomely real.

He couldn't blame her, he was tempted to do the same. He had seen something like that before, with an ocean of blood that bound him in sinew and burned against his skin and countless heartbeats that pounded against him as if trying to crack him open. He reminded himself it wasn't real. Still, the image would not leave his head, too visceral to be forgotten.

Razor whistled.

Connie tried to laugh. It sounded... the sound trailed up and away, pitching itself higher and ending up somewhere closer to a cry than anything like a laugh. Blind (*hysteria*) briefly transmitted through their connection. He cleared his throat. "Aha, what, ah, are we getting into, here?"

"Heaven," Beast answered, nostrils dilated as though she could've smelled it if she tried hard enough.

Quiet inhaled too sharply. From Quiet, there came a sound like gurgling blood in a throat, like the sopping sound of churning tar. A deep pressure rolled into each of them, an overwhelming sense of weight. Quiet's consciousness slipped from Nando's thread near seamlessly, his body sinking into the couch like a stone in a swamp, his soul crunching into itself and away, away, away.

Voice of the Hunted

This place is different. Rotten. Death all around us. I want to go back!

(PANIC) I—! (Conflict) (Wrong) That's not me.

It was agonizingly slow, yet Nando couldn't push against the weight, could just feel his thread growing thinner and weaker under the strain. And then the force dragging him down--stopped.

"Woah there killer," Grace exhaled harshly, as though bracing against a great force. *"Try not to sink outside the net, we're trying to catch you here."*

'Death?' No. (Torment) (Agony) (Loneliness) Not so lucky.

The Narrator

The body of a sapient creature has, on-average, thirty trillion cells. And each of those cells is composed of one-hundred-trillion-some-odd atoms.

You are a thirty-trillion little pieces, all of them separate, and all of them falling.

You sit in these thirty-trillion places, each second passing in each of them before you arrive at the next. Each second passing as one million years.

[Levity] (Strain) That didn't answer much, but hey, twelve for effort!

(Desperation) Please don't leave me.

(Reassurance) I know it's my calling card, but I wasn't planning on it.

(Panic) Please.

Nando didn't know who the ever-encompassing (*fear*) belonged to, but it festered in him with a vengeance.

Outside of their net, Tabi swallowed thickly once. Twice. Thrice. She seemed about ready to go the same way her twin did.

Voice of the Stubborn

All right! Change of plans. We're taking the blade this time and we're not hiding upstairs.

Voice of the Broken

Who cares about the blade? If we had a chance against her, we already missed it, didn't we? She got stronger, and we stayed the same.

Nando could have sworn his ears popped with the way Ciro's enraged yell resonated both inside and out. His eyes were miniature storms. "La puta que te parió, are you shitting me right now? We not only have to put up with him here but also in the game?!"

Felipe tore his eyes away from where Dami had fled to as he rose. Ciro regarded him by turning his head, not even his body, in his direction. "¿Qué querés?!"

(HATE)

He couldn't hear. He couldn't see. He couldn't move, breathe, think— there was only the faintest flicker of 'him,' embroiled in an all-consuming fire so hot it existed beyond temperature, lost in the dark of an unyielding force. It hurt. It was hurting him. He knew nothing beyond it. He knew nothing beyond that he existed and he was despised. He angered all that was not him merely by existing, by continuing to experience its rage, but there was nothing but it— it, and him, which it despised so strongly—

It felt like something was being ripped out of them—

—Something took the force. It dissipated— no, diluted. Nando blinked rapidly, wheezing, the breath having been knocked out of him, as dark spots danced in his vision. The hatred and the anger was still boring into, possibly through him, but he could see now that it was hitting the others just as bad.

Paco and Ave were immobile, Gonchi's fists were clenched as he breathed. Connie was pale beside him. Quiet had returned to his previous position.

(Concern) Breathe. Breathe. It's meant for me, not you.

(Guilt) You shouldn't have felt that. No one hates you. You don't deserve it.

[Kindness] (Strain) (Reciprocation) Say that to yourself.

Somehow, Ciro was still sitting, the same storm in his eyes. "You don't know anything. He deserved what he got." Nando could hear wind rushing in. Oh, no. "Sit the fuck down, Smee, and let me work."

"I know plenty," Felipe said. He looked taller. Was he taller? People didn't just *get* taller. Nando couldn't breathe. He wasn't sure whose fault that was anymore. Everyone was bundling too tight together.

(Terror) He's going to kill us. Right here.

(Tension) Lie low. Don't move. Don't give him a sound.

(Vindication) You see what you left me to deal with?

(Frustration) Not the time!

(Resignation) Not you, me. Again.

(Rage) Bullshit. He dies first.

(Panic) Heart-Lungs-Liver-Nerves-Heart-Lungs-Liver-Nerves-Heart—

"I know you harmed and cast aside my companion and don't feel a gram of remorse. I know you harbor a villain who drives stakes and wedges into lovers' hearts because he thinks he's above blame. I know you can't see what's right in front of you, we're not the ones you should be angry at. You've been—"

Ava stood suddenly and grabbed Felipe by the back of his jacket, yanking him back and making him trip over his words. She pushed him down with one hand, and he hit his seat with a thud. "Sit down."

It was fascinating to see the shadows drop off his body like water dripping down stone. In an instant, Felipe returned to the shape of a man Nando recognized, his head flicking up with a shocked, semi-dazed expression on his face. "What?"

"Be polite," Plethora requested.

"Know your place," Thelka demanded. "And the limits of your privilege as houseguests."

"I don't want you tearing up the living room with your spat," Ava ground out through sharp teeth. Nando never thought such a threatening tone of voice could sound reassuring. "And if

things come to blows between all of you, I'm joining in."

(Relief) (Admiration) There you are. That's my Princess.

Gonchi looked like he just watched the sun come up. Resolutely, he ignored the mocking Connie oh-so-readily gave him.

Plethora appeared to be sulking; the half of them, at least. "May we leave the violence to the game, or at least until after it?"

"Fine by me," Ciro muttered.

(Frustration) This bastard's quote has been stuck on the screen too long, anyway.

(Conceptualization) I hope I can skip all his dialogue. This shit sucks.

(Notice) (Anxiety) A marginal preference. We'll have to deal with them both at some point.

(Focus) We'll get there when we get there. (Hunger) (Bloodlust) We'll get there soon.

Voice of the Stubborn

We've seen her bleed. Whatever she is, she started out mortal, which means she probably is still mortal, which means we can win. We just didn't take things seriously enough last time.

Voice of the Broken

If that's what you want then fine. Enjoy being beaten to death again and again and again.

Harri's jaw fell open.

"He keeps getting worse and worse!" Clara sang.

"Tone down the pessimism," Nando said automatically, without even really thinking.

"Yeah, it's annoying!" Razor agreed.

Tabi reached over to push Harri's mouth closed. He glanced across the room and smiled.

(Astonishment) Look at you thinking, Gonchi!

(Annoyance) Shut it, four eyes.

Voice of the Contrarian

Oh, why so glum, rage-boy? I thought you were brave! I thought you were proud! Or was all of that bravado just hot air?

Connie stiffened.

(Confusion) (Disorientation) That's not— sorry, I don't know what that was.

(Indignation) 'Rage-boy—?' I'm older than you!

The Narrator

Well this is just great. Sigh. Let me cut to the chase. Clearly you've already been here.

Voice of the Hero

Yeah, you think?

The image blurs.

Voice of the Contrarian

What does 'here' even mean, though? You've told us about the path and the Princess and all of that already, but this is a very different path than the last one.

Nando did not need to survey the room. Cain's amusement was palpable. Not particularly strong, but astonishingly invasive. Could amusement feel mean?

(Horror) That's not what I m— (Assertion) That's not even me. I don't know what that is.

(Amusement) Isn't it?

*(Denial) Shut **up!** That's not me, I haven't said anything. (Disorientation) What's happening?*

Voice of the Broken

Actually, I don't think we have been here. This is all different, isn't it?

The Narrator

Look. If the world around you is changing, especially all the way out here, then that means you're nearing the point of no return. Whatever happens next, that's it, there won't be anymore 'do-overs', so you'd better take things seriously.

“What’s the point of being so serious all the time?” Connie asked, stretching. He glanced towards Quiet, still as ever, and settled back down into his seat. It didn’t disrupt the game at all. It kept playing regardless.

- (Explore) It feels like I'm being pulled in a hundred different directions. You'd better all listen to me when the time comes to make a choice.
- (Explore) If we hit this 'point of no return' you mentioned... then what happens?
- No matter what happens next, it seems like our answers are at the cabin. We might as well see this through. [Proceed to the cabin.]
- [Silently proceed to the cabin.]
- I'm done with this. Bye! [Turn around and leave.]

“What’s wrong with the Choicemaker this time?”

Winnie reacted to the options faster than Nando did. But that first one still sat, defiantly, at the top of the list, demanding his attention. So Quiet wasn't kidding when he said the others 'pulled' at him, like a marionette and its strings... and that conceptualization of their relationship wasn't new to him, wasn't entirely Borja's doing.

That didn't mean it wasn't wrong.

Voice of the Contrarian

A hundred? Where are you getting that number? We're talking four, maaaaaybe five directions, tops. At least for now. I'm sure I can come up with more if you give me enough time.

(Precision) Eleven. (Fondness) That's the grand total.

Nando couldn't be certain where, or from who, certain sentiments were coming from. But he felt... hurt. Or guilt. It was likely both. And it was likely, at least in part, from himself. Likely from all of them in their own ways.

[Rationality] (Correction) Twelve, counting yourself.

[Levity] (Pettiness) Thirteen, counting Him. Now that's a lucky number!

(Disgust) No, we're not ever counting Him. He's not one of us.

(Disregard) (Loss) ...Eleven.

[Care] We'll call it twelve.

A weary sigh made the hairs on the back of Nando's neck stand up. *"And here I thought women could vote."*

(Spook) Shit! I forgot you were here.

(Fondness) ...

(Acceptance) Twelve.

Grace's voice was lined with mischief. *"Wow, that's cold."*

(Surprise) ...! (Panic) No, I— I meant...!

"There's no good way to clarify 'I'm still disregarding my own free will,' killer. How about you just up the tally another point?"

(Defeat) Fine. Thirteen.

- (Explore) It feels like I'm being pulled in a hundred different directions. You'd better all listen to me when the time comes to make a choice.

Voice of the Broken

It feels like you're being pulled in a hundred different directions because we've been beaten to death twice.

Voice of the Hero

I don't think you have much to worry about. You're still the one in charge here, and I don't think that's ever going to change.

Nando was impressed, pleasantly surprised, with himself. That's just what he thought Quiet needed to hear.

(Reassurance) Yeah. Hear that? That's never going to change.

(Lie) You're right. There's absolutely nothing to worry about.

(Worry) (Frustration) Don't insult us.

(Indicator) (Acknowledgement) You know you're an awful liar.

Tabi straightened in her seat, not quite looking directly at the screen. "Do you actually feel the pains of your previous life?"

"Yes," several voices answered her. Ciro added, "hurts like a bitch."

She nodded, jotting down something in her notebook. Beside her, Harri squinted as if piecing something together. "If it feels like pulling, here, then maybe..." he paused. Briefly, Nando could feel a *(hesitation)* coming from him, though the conflict beneath it was utterly imperceptible to the physical eye. He was being pulled to a conclusion, one he already knew, but he didn't quite know if he should share it. With Tabi, absolutely. With the others, it was all but a given. But with certain other untrustworthy parties? It was a gamble. "...the body isn't being entirely reset, just recycled."

"Scar tissue?" Tabi hypothesized. She wasn't quite meeting his eyes. It looked like she was staring at some unseen spot on his neck.

Harri nodded to her without saying anything else.

With Harri connected as he was, it didn't take long for everyone else to see what Tabi meant. Nando was suddenly grateful for Gonchi and his healing. He hoped the princesses wouldn't have been able to connect the dots from one simple comment, but the more cautious the better.

On the other side of the room, Borja's hand raised to his chest. To the patchwork of scars along his chest Nando remembered well, the scars they didn't deserve nor need. Felipe watched the motion, then met Borja's eyes. The two shared a nod. It made Nando sick.

Voice of the Cold

I've never made you do anything you didn't want to do yourself. It'll be interesting to see what's happened to her. She was so fiery last time... I wonder if we've managed to douse that

flame.

Voice of the Stubborn

You'd better hope not. I liked her spark.

Voice of the Cold

'Hope not?' Is that some kind of threat? What could you possibly do to me?

Voice of the Stubborn

Wouldn't you like to find out, you chilly little freak!

(Resignation) Why am I not surprised?

*(Shock) (Protectiveness) It **was** a threat, you better not try anything with her!*

(Suspicion) You've 'never made him do anything' — you had just hatched.

(Agreement) That's correct. I don't lie.

*(Suspicion) (Scrutiny) How do we know **that's** not a lie too?*

(Observation) Your first name was a perfect description.

*(Exhaustion) Can you please not fight? I **know** you.*

That depends on him.

*(Disbelief) Are you **seriously** pinning this on me?! (Blame) I was responding to you!*

(Passivity) I'm just speaking my mind.

Voice of the Broken

So what if I'm speaking my mind? It's not like I've ever really gotten a say in things...

Voice of the Stubborn

What a crock of shit.

Voice of the Hero

Yeah, you stabbed us last time. Repeatedly.

Voice of the Broken

It didn't even work. It doesn't count.

Voice of the Stubborn

We died!

Voice of the Hero

If you didn't submit to her, for all we know, that wouldn't have happened.

Voice of the Broken

It's the punishment you all deserved for not listening to me. To her.

Voice of the Hero

Aside from our sulking friend, I don't think you have much to worry about. You're still the one in charge here, and I don't think that's ever going to change.

Voice of the Stubborn

The second he tries something, I'll put a stop to it.

That bitch.

That one, it seemed, was coming from multiple sources.

*(Purpose) Well, I had the right idea, didn't I? I could do with a little 'putting a stop to it' right about now. I like the sound of it. Sounds **violent**.*

*[Score] Hold the fucking phone— he **stabbed** us?!*

(Exhaustion) (Confirmation) Yeah, he sure did. Sure did. Didn't die, though.

(Gratitude) Because you stopped him from killing us.

(Confusion) (Disorientation) ...

*[Score] (Grudge) The fuck does he mean, 'doesn't count?' I think every stab wound tends to **'count,'** jackass!*

[Thirst] How many times is 'repeatedly?'

[Flippancy] (Disregard) Does the number really matter?

[Score] (Tension) Too fucking many, is the answer.

(Frustration) Are you all just allergic to math?

[Flippancy] (Levity) Maybe!

(Exhaustion) I had my hands full, I didn't exactly have time to count.

(Humor) Hah. 'Hands full.'

[Paranoia] (Tension) Since when is he a 'friend'?

*(Notice) (Clarification) Oh, I can answer that one! He clearly meant it sarcastically. Right?
It's a tone thing, chap.*

*(Exhaustion) (Disdain) He certainly wasn't a friend how I knew him, yeah. Less so if he got
us killed.*

*[Paranoia] (Pressure) Then **why** did you let him in our house in the first place? Why did
either of you?*

(Guilt) I thought I could get through to him.

*[Score] (Frustration) Can we not do this right now? We've already got two fucks to deal with
before we start tearing at each other's throats.*

[Vigilance] And the usual threats.

*(Pleasantry) (Nervousness) Couldn't've said it better, myself! No need for all this messy in-
fighting when we can all agree on the real threats from the outside.*

[Vitality] (Disbelief) I can't believe I'm agreeing with you.

*[Score] (Spite) 'That's the punishment you all deserve for not agreeing with me?' Good to
know he hasn't changed at all.*

"You don't deserve it. Any of it." Grace's presence and words were cold like a pillow on a late night was cold, with a certain degree of comfort and rest promised with the drop in temperature. The kind of chill to slow down the rampant thoughts of a troubled mind. Nando could feel her calm reassurance settling into Quiet. By proxy, into him.

[Gentleness] (Gratitude) Agreed on that.

Nando didn't know what he felt like, in turn. But he was too busy to be wondering about it.

"We've been staring blankly for a while, now, killer. Are you okay?"

(Disorientation) I don't know.

(Confusion) (Realignment) What's been on the screen?

[Levity] (Hesitation) Well that's not concerning at all.

(Dread) Just keep going. It's done, whatever it is.

[Vigilance] (Worry) Is it?

[Skepticism] For now, maybe.

[Cold] He's right. No point wondering about it.

The Narrator

The interior of the cabin is a place that feels long forgotten. There was once an elegance to its construction, carved marble columns holding a high-arched roof, vaulted windows letting in the weak starlight. But that is how it was. Now, there is a growth that has overtaken it. A viscous fluid seeps from cracks in the stone walls, and it congeals into chaotic streaks of writhing nerves and wet clumps of living meat.

Nando felt himself straighten abruptly as Tabitha retched, bringing both hands to her mouth. Her pallor did bring her sister to mind.

(Bemusement) There is less meat on the screen than before, and she reacts like that.

(Annoyance) Can you quit being an ass?

Ava looked downright disgusted. “What is this?! Why so much meat? Why is it *growing*?”

“Not growing,” Ave corrected, and Nando startled to hear his voice, rather than... think it. “It’s cracking its shell and breaking free. Hatching.”

He blinked, and nightmares unfolded behind his eyes. He tried to stop it, but he had more chances of stopping an avalanche with a shovel.

He didn’t realize it spilled over, at first. Even with his eyes open, it burned into the front of his mind. For a moment, his bones ached and pressed bruise-soft against his skin. His lungs seized like hands were smothering his face and he was breathing in blood-water again, like he was coughing it out, choking and drowning in it. Flash-freezing in hypothermic ocean waters and burning alive in a pool of blood and intestines, going into temperature shock with the rapid, flickering change. Pain and agony beyond comprehension, that slipped away from him the moment the memory ended and fell away into some well to be recaptured another time—and that time, this time, was now.

It was over in a heartbeat, for him.

The others had to process it.

A hand touched his. Barely. A featherlight brush of their fingertips, and Nando almost startled.

(Consumption) (Submission) (Terror) (Pain) Is that what you meant by ‘drowning?’

(Skepticism) (Rivalry) (Unfamiliarity) Is this what everyone felt?

(Devotion) (Betrayal) Is this what you were hiding from me?

Is this what I let happen?

He reached out to capture that hand in his own. It was a motion as natural, as necessary as breathing. He might’ve been drowning or burning, the two sensations felt so intertwined in

the moments between blinks, but neither truly registered. As long as he was holding their hand, it wasn't really there.

(Longing) This is what you stopped from happening.

The rest of the world filtered back in, as did the others. He wasn't burning anymore—something, someone, was keeping it down. A settling in his chest. A heaviness to his eyelids, alleviating as he blinked and started to wake up from a fraction of a nightmare. There was, from what he could see, mist curling in wisps around his arms. He could faintly hear soft, hushed breathing. Someone, something, was checking to see if he was alright, lingering over him; it was a gentle cold. He couldn't quite decide how it felt.

[Pain] (Shock) Fucking hell. Warn a guy next time?

[Indiscernible] Is it over?

A sound like a clicking lock, like peeking out from the slightest crack in the door behind chains. Nando didn't mean to do that. It came across as a wince.

Gold practically spluttered from a thread, sparkling.

[Thirst] Was that Transformation?

(Disinterest) An idea of it, seemed like. One tired interpretation.

*[Horror] How are we supposed to run from **that**?*

[Instinct] (Analysis) Can't run; had him bound by the extremities. Can't fight; will kill us before we kill it. Need a different path. Direct confrontation is certain death.

(Surprise) (Fascination) ...

*[Rage] This isn't fair! She lost! She doesn't get to change the course! And what was with the —?! (Temperance) What the **fuck**...*

It wasn't supposed to have happened, to make it known to everyone else in the flock. It couldn't have waited until they were home. It couldn't have been something less overwhelming. She didn't need to be tactful, or subtle, she could just take.

Nando hated her *so much*. She made his eyes water.

*(Curiosity) (Awe) So you **can** hate. (Agreement) Great, that makes two of us.*

"Eleven," Grace corrected. "Unless more than the traitorous two are counting out."

(Certainty) No. We won't be.

Voice of the Hero

That's horrible.

Voice of the Stubborn

It doesn't matter.

The light bends.

Voice of the Cold

It's just meat. If you cut us open, I'm sure we'd look the same inside.

Voice of the Hero

That's why it's horrible.

Voice of the Cold

And that attitude is why you're miserable.

“Why do you keep pausing at random points?” Razor pouted.

“What a fitting line to be stuck on,” Tabi said, pointing to the screen that none of them could see. Not over the echoes. Not over the twisting pains.

It was so bizarre, feeling disgust from his actual self and a self he never was. It was so bizarre, feeling like nothing he'd ever experienced was happening all over again. It was so bizarre how one scene rolled over into the next and he didn't even sense the change—but could feel his very being roll with it, into a new scrambling of an identity—could feel his awareness strip away from him and linger just out of reach. And then come back to him in the next instant, memory returning like it never left, with another new addition all the same. It was disorienting.

The others, the ones not there in those moments, wouldn't get that experience. And yet he was there for all of it.

“Thinking about the room,” Ciro bluffed.

There was more being said, if Nando strained to hear the vocal tones over the next rolling wind. But the words that he assumed weren't real were the ones that took priority in his comprehension.

Voice of the Broken

You did this.

Voice of the Contrarian

I think it's kind of nice. Makes the room feel alive, doesn't it?

“...I can have marble decor!” He caught the tail end of Ava's interruption. She sounded offended, though at who he couldn't tell. “At least it seems like it looked nicer before the...

flesh took hold of it.”

“I don’t think marble is very... ‘you.’”

“You can’t judge me based off the last cabin,” Ava defended hastily, then crossed her arms. “But— *tsk*, you’re right. This is still way too...”

“Fancy?”

“Ornate?”

“Ostentatious?”

“*Gaudy*.” Ava frowned. “And now it’s gross, too. The only blood I like is blood pouring out of me or him.”

“I think the only one who’d like that cabin is Beast.”

“I think I’ve seen something like this.” Borja leaned in. Nando fought back the urge to send (*hate*) in his direction.

[Skepticism] (Concern) This wasn’t happening before. What’s different about this route compared to the last two that you can’t focus on what’s in front of you?

[Cheer] Seems like there’s a lot of variation to look forward to!

(Rejection) No. It ends the same. It always ends the same.

[Cheer] (Backpedal) ...Seems like there’s a lot of variation to appreciate now!

Ciro, Nando had to give him credit, was surprisingly good at keeping focus between the others and his own activities. He progressed readily as soon as audible conversation died down.

The Narrator

The only furniture of note is a pulsating pedestal, a pristine blade perched on its edge. The blade is your implement. You’ll need it if you want to do this right.

“I don’t get why it’s a *pedestal*,” Ava complained. “What about me screams *pedestal*?”

“Pedestals are for worship,” Tabi noted. “For offerings.”

“I don’t think Ava is worshipped like that,” Winnie added, grinning.

“You bet I’m not!”

“If anything,” Tabi said slowly, “that would make sense for the ‘goddess’ of the room.”

Quiet blinked. His threads gained a little extra weight, a certain energy humming through them. They were conscious and aware, was what the added feeling meant; that it’d been

missing so long that its reintegration to the web felt like an addition was less than heartening.

(Agreement) This is also an alternate fate for Thelka.

Watch your tone, little bird.

(Shock) (Overwhelm) I didn't—! (Submission) I'm sorry.

Nando felt a hundred times heavier. The weight of the world crashed into him, a great pressure mounting onto his shoulders as a burning attention lit up his soul. He was illuminated to be seen and judged, wholly and irreverently, evaluated like a cut of meat or material offering. Like something was slipping through his fingers.

The lighting of the room did not change, and yet the ambient light felt like it was burning into his sensitive eyes. He squinted as a horrid pain pressed into his head, one eye winking shut. Had he the presence of mind to examine the room, perhaps he could've seen if the others were reacting similarly, or if he were alone in this; but all he could feel was the pressure. He focused on the darkest thing in the room, the web no one else could see. In it...

Orange spread, fire on black.

*(Careful) (Caution) (Loathing) **Eavesdropper.***

*Hm. **(Cold)** (Irritation) It's rude to intrude on conversations you aren't a part of.*

It's rude to talk about someone who's listening.

She sounded defensive. Maybe even offended. Nando couldn't tell, but from the corner of his eye, it almost looked like Connie had started grinning. It was almost encouraging.

The fire continued to spread throughout the net. It felt like hands were trying to push up from below, straining to pull the pressure off his shoulders. Ever so slightly, it worked.

"How dare you?"

(Barrier) (Resistance) (Imperceptibility) Can't say I expected to get along with the chilly one, but I do commend the respectful tone we're keeping here!

You cut the tongue of my priest and proceed to use my name in vain. You forfeited any right you might've had to privacy with your blasphemous heresy.

(Disbelief) (Derealization) This isn't real. None of this is real. She, especially, isn't real. Divinity... faith... it's all just made up! We don't have to believe in it!

(Passivity) The only power gods have is the power you grant them. We didn't invite her in.

(Disbelief) Exactly! And she is nothing, absolutely nothing to us. She's weaker than us, even! Completely powerless.

(Agreement) We're special.

Do you think you can think me into submission? I will not be bound by your madness. I am as real as the pain of your errant memory.

If he could've moved, Nando would have covered his ears. It was worse when hearing it inside his own head. It burned. It *burned*. He *hated* her.

As if in response to specifically his pains, Thelka turned her eyes on him. He more so felt her fake, gentle smile than he saw it, overcome with the weight of her attention. She cooed at him like he was a pitiful thing. He *hated* her, and he made sure she knew it.

Don't fret, little birds.

If you don't provoke me, I won't have to take any further action in your affairs.

The strain and pull of muscle. A straightening posture. A body rising to attention. Nando couldn't see beyond the light blinding him, but he knew Oli was being called to action all the same. He could imagine that sharp smile. Oli could never resist a loophole, threat or not.

(Opportunity) *Wow. Great thing we have no intentions of ever provoking you!*

(Contract) (Binding) *We'll prompt you ourselves if we ever need any sort of 'divine intervention.' Less work on your end, yeah? No need to listen to all this petty squabbling.*

[Cheer] *So glad we got that sorted!*

Something slammed shut. Oli exhaled roughly enough Nando could hear it. The world went back to normal. There were pins and needles behind his eyes. Distantly, he felt Quiet squeeze his hand

(Loathing) (Revulsion) (Strain) *There. No more prying in our heads. (Exhaustion) Paco, give me a hand here.*

(Confusion) *What are you doing?*

(Haste) (Strain) *He's **working**. We have to keep her out.*

(Boredom) *You're gods. This should be easy for you, I thought.*

(Complaint) *Being a god is exhausting.*

(Guilt) *I—*

(Warning) *Don't you dare apologize.*

(Obedience) *Okay. (...Gratitude) (Pride)* *Then, all of you apologize to Oli.*

No.

(...Disappointment) *How about a 'thank you for dealing with that woman with a god complex for us, Oli, that was so sharp! What quick thinking. I never would've thought of that. What*

would we ever do without you?’

(Disgust) No.

Ciro blinked as he hunched over the laptop with newfound rage. Vengeance’s color was blue, bending light in a way that showed refraction of all colors, the same sentiment echoed.

Soon.

Voice of the Stubborn

Take it. We're going into this prepared.

- (Explore) [Take the blade.]

The Narrator

You take the blade from the pedestal. It would be difficult to slay the Princess and save the world without a weapon.

Voice of the Stubborn

Good. Nothing feels better than gripping cold steel.

“Agreed. After what happened last time, going without the blade would be stupid.” Tabi said.

There was something like strain in her posture, and Nando wondered what had she seen, what she had experienced, with Harri’s thread over her shoulders like that. He wondered how Dami was doing.

Voice of the Contrarian

Okay, okay. You picked up the blade. That's fine. But we're not taking it with us.

The Narrator

Oh? And what do you plan to do with it then?

Voice of the Contrarian

Oh, I dunno. We... throw it out the window!

Voice of the Stubborn

Hell no.

Voice of the Hero

Yeah... what if we need it?

Voice of the Contrarian

Psht. We don't need it! We had her up against the ropes last time.

Voice of the Hero

Did we?

Voice of the Stubborn

Angry grumbling. We were doing great. But a weapon would have been useful.

Voice of the Contrarian

Are you saying that you don't think we can win this fair and square?

Voice of the Stubborn

No, I'm just—

Voice of the Contrarian

Because it sounds to me like you don't think we can win this fair and square.

Voice of the Stubborn

You know what, fine! I'm with him! We started round two with our fists, and that's how we're going to end this. You! Annoying one who keeps telling us what to do! We throw the blade out the window.

(Disbelief) (Irritation) (Malice) CONNIE!

(Irritation) Again?...

(Humor) (Levity) Hell yeah. (Fondness) There's your third beat.

(Nervousness) (Tension) Ahaha, yeah... (Guilt) Doesn't seem funny in this context, though.

(Warning) There better not be a fourth time we run into.

(Guilt) Sorry for forcing you. Getting yanked and pulled around doesn't sound fun at all.

(Surprise) Oh. (Dismissal) It's alright. That's how it works.

(Servitude) It's what you wanted. (Gratitude) And it turned out alright in the end!... Better than if you weren't there to push me.

Maybe that was the worst part. That Quiet was trying to make them feel better about it. That he didn't think much of it. He felt his stomach twist into knots.

The Narrator

You step forward and approach the door to the basement, hesitating before you open it. Almost as if you don't see it. But you must, because it's right there in front of you.

Voice of the Stubborn

All we see is a damned mirror.

- [Smash it.]

The Narrator

You bring your fist crashing down against the door leading to the basement. As if on command, it slowly slides open, scraping against the stone floor, its ancient hinges moaning as it reveals the dim path ahead.

Voice of the Hero

Why am I not surprised...

The Narrator

You step forward into the darkness

The Narrator

The stairs leading down to the basement are at once both narrow and grandiose. A high-vaulted ceiling stretches up into a gloom beyond your sight while walls wet with tumorous growths press in uncomfortably at your sides. You feel both unprotected and trapped, at once exposed and claustrophobic.

The air is thick, its odor an oppressive violence — the metallic scent of fresh blood twisting with the nauseating embers of charred remains. If the Princess lives here, slaying her is probably doing her a favor.

“This is disgusting.” Tabi said, still concerningly pale.

“It’s *been* disgusting.”

“No, it’s more— why is it so *wet*?”

“It’s fresh,” Beast said. She was drooling. Abruptly, her eyes fixed on the two (three?) at Nando’s side, Quiet, by proxy Grace, and Connie. Her eyes closed as her nostrils flared, then opened with a more intense, piercing stare.

He didn’t know why she did, but he wanted that gaze away from them.

The Narrator

Her voice—a bellowing rage—roars up the stairs.

And so you've returned. Do you intend to cower and hide again? Or have you finally decided to try and kill me?

I think you'll find it won't be so simple. I've... changed. The way your body broke and bled against the walls of this temple... it woke something in me.

A fight is a song, but there was no music in our conflict. There was no beauty in what we did to each other. And now there is no beauty in me. Come down and see what you've done.

Voice of the Broken

It cuts both ways. We've both hurt each other.

A single moment of silence of incomprehensible length. It lasted an eternity and it lasted a finite time; it was long and it was short; it would break but never bend; it would cease but never stop; impermanent yet unyielding. A shared moment of realization. Their threads shining so brightly they overtook the black.

Voice of the Cold

Oh, we've changed her, have we? I'm intrigued.

Voice of the Contrarian

Do you hear that? Sounds like we got to her last time. Let's keep pushing, see what else we can make happen.

(Intrigue) Oh. How interesting.

*(Shock) (Denial) (Discomfort) ...I-it's not **that** special.*

A shiver and a helpful conversion, from discomfort to defensive rage.

*(Denial) (Rage) It's **nothing**. It means nothing!*

Rage was something Ciro was used to, something he knew how to use and left him drained after. This time, it ran so hot it went right to the opposite end of the spectrum.

Ciro felt like he was walking on air, the eye of a storm. There was only him, and Borja, and the wind, and he grew more gelid with every beat of his heart. It hurt. He swore he could feel his skin cracking with it. It would rip him apart if it had no other outlet. The rage pushed against his throat as it always did, urging him to speak, and yet this time it was just as cold as the rest of him, just as bitter in its stillness. For one moment, for one person, for one purpose, there was only one thing that needed to be said.

(Truth) "I'm going to kill you."

Quiet, cold, and fatal.

Spoken in the tone of a funeral bell, it was a warning and it was a promise. Every single thing Borja had said since they stepped foot in the lion's den had killed him a little more, he just didn't know it at the time. But it felt so good watching him come to that realization.

And then, having spoken the immovable truth, the unstoppable torrent of rage pushed further — and his throat tore open with his mouth. “We didn't do shit to her! We wanted to get out of there and she chased us and killed us! How do we get blamed for this?! Where the fuck is this coming from, Ava?!”

Ava straightened, but even he could tell her heart wasn't in it. She was the bloodthirsty type, like him, and she wanted to see what he was capable of. What carnage his hands could make, what havoc he could wreak. “That isn't me!”

Oh, it was. He'd known it the moment they'd walked down the stairs and saw her. Heard the violence in her voice and saw the blood spill from their bodies. He'd known it when the choice was made; to slay or not to slay, it didn't matter the reasoning in the end when throats got slit. This was always how things were, how they had to be. It was always her.

He knew how that ended. He'd been too close to it before.

That talking wasn't just mockery. It was *ritual*. A sharpening of blades. A test of how far she could push him before he snapped. Ciro believed in justice, but he believed in blood as well. And it was coming.

That voice turning cruelty into a song—it made his skin crawl. It wasn't a song anymore. It was a hunt. ‘Woke something in her,’ no. It'd been there the whole time, waiting.

He wasn't looking at her. “And it's like whatever bullshit she does to us is okay? She killed us!”

An eye for an eye would make the world go blind, but not in their cases. They would take so much more than an eye if he let them. His housemates knew that. Quiet had known that, once. She knew that, too. She just didn't want to admit it.

“There's no music or song in *bleeding*, ” he spat. “There's never beauty. There's no moral, there's no lesson, there's no point. People bleed when you hurt them, when they're hurt at all; and if they're hurt enough, they die, because they cannot bleed anymore. The only pleasure to be taken in blood is the pleasure of being the one who hurts the other; the only joy I will take in your blood is that I was the one to spill it, and there will be no more left to spill once I'm done.”

And the nights when he would sleep better than before, knowing there was one less problem with the world.

He was right, it was satisfying to see Borja realize he didn't have much time. It was satisfying to hear the first silence, now revitalized, echo around the room. It was satisfying to watch the debris crumble into ashes around him.

His eyelids felt a little heavy, as did his limbs. Rage did that to him. Left him tired. Left him...

(Cold) Good job.

(Rejection) I didn't do it for you.

...Not tired enough for *that*. Cain, the condescending prick, could still fuck off for all Ciro cared. His head prickled with pins and needles as Cain's thread brushed past his own, unheeded. He shook his head to clear it of the lingering chill.

(Hesitance) If someone has to bleed... wouldn't it be better if it was just one person?

(Reluctance) (Responsibility) Just one thing that suffering is inflicted upon.

[Righteousness] (Insistence) Weren't you listening? It's better if nobody has to bleed at all. Isn't that why you did all this?

(Contemplation) (Introspection) ...

It is how things have to be. (Apprehension) This'll show you.

(Suspicion) Those are the words of someone who knows they're marching to their death.

(Dread) There are worse things than that.

Ciro was struck, quite suddenly, with a self-made bolt of inspiration. It was almost energizing, despite how drained he was, to see the cracks and flaws in this bullshit system. Of course. They could always flip the table!

(Declaration) And I say that's not how it works here and now and it's not how it worked then and there either. (Pride) You said we were gods, right? So we literally make the rules.

(Shock) (Rage) You take that back.

He blinked. That was surprising, because he knew Connie would not cross a line. Connie was *oh so careful* of the lines, more than any of them. More than Ciro. He toed around and along lines, yes, but the second he stepped across— a rare occurrence— he took leaps and bounds to scramble back to the realm of acceptable behavior. He would poke and prod and push at the others, but never to a breaking point; not at all like Cain would do, despite their superficial similarities. Cain reveled to the fullest extent in what he could do to people— if their errant memories were concerned, what he could change them into. Connie had *boundaries*.

Connie had a knack for living on the edge, of driving Ciro just to the edge of madness— and, without fail, stopping when he was told.

In respect for that, Ciro had to wonder just what Connie was telling him to stop doing. He had come up with the start of a solution!

(Surprise) I would think you'd be all for rewriting the rules.

(Indignation) Were none of you paying attention? No. That's going about things all wrong.

(Assertion) (Rebellion) Rules are for breaking, not following, everyone knows that.

[Reason] But to break them we need to know them first, right?

"Oh, she made sure he knew them," Grace whispered in distaste. Ciro startled at her tone of voice, layering one on top of another, hissing like steam. "Each and every one. Used us and our memory for his lessons, 'til he couldn't remember what he really meant to me."

Risking an odd look or two, Ciro turned to survey the room— mainly to see what Quiet looked like as Grace's voice used him as an adaptor, though he ended up making eye contact with Connie incidentally. He looked far, far more serious than Ciro had ever seen him before.

(Indignation) (Disgust) I'm not making use of her tactics, even as a joke.

[Gentleness] (Revulsion) (Pride) ...Salud, Connie.

(Disgust) We're not making rules for them. (Levity) I'll have to teach you how to be less of a stickler.

The Narrator

You make your way to the bottom of the stairs.

The chamber's walls are painted in blood, a deep sickening red that drips down in clotted streams onto the charred corpses that make up its floor. This place reeks of torment, of ripped skin and burning bone. The Princess stands in its center, muscles flayed and bare and weeping, draped in a tattered dress of her own skin. Her heart beats from its place in her open chest.

Ciro had hatched from undeserved bloodshed, it was rage that had allowed him to be heard. He had a certain threshold for grotesque imagery. This 'basement' and its occupant, however, was beyond what he had expected. And not just because the Narrator's descriptions weren't accurate. (Fucker couldn't even do His job right.)

They were standing in a tomb. Columns rose from the floor like growths, cracked by more pulsating meat. And the corpses littering its unholy grounds— he knew those corpses and they belonged to one person. Emaciated and skeletal as they were, with stick-thin arms that reached towards the center of the room as if begging for mercy, their fragile fingers bent and curled and broken at odd angles as if trapped in prayer and worship, he knew them. Charred and burnt up as they were from their heads to their upper torsos, as if blown back from the room's center in an explosion that petrified them perfectly in place, he knew them. Melted from the torso down as they were, bodies stretched like taffy candy from the pooling masses

of meat that they either unwound and sloughed into or were pulled and shaped out of, he knew who they were.

Of course, the others were more focused on the occupant who shouldn't be alive. Thorn had looked like an older Winnie, and the Clarity was still Nightmare, but the Fury looked nothing like Ava.

Her skin was torn and twisted, wrinkled and worn over her musculature more like a tattered dress than another part of her body, ripping into sheets not unlike the strips of skin of the 'trees' outside. Below the moth-eaten ends of her dress of dead skin, her legs were all muscle, literally, ending with heeled hooves of bone. Her tail was gone, as was the center horn, replaced by a tiara of steel and nails that pierced her skull and pinned up what remained of her chest. Her exposed ribcage framed a tantalizingly bare heart. She was too tall, almost elongated compared to how she had been before. Her hair, light and far longer than Ava's, billowed out in long waves down to her lower back. And her eyes... the black sclera were unlike anything he'd ever seen, but the radiant glow from her pupils was very, very familiar. He'd seen that light projected, always, the moment he'd first met her. He'd felt that light seared into his soul when she pried her way into their minds.

It was with a lot more conviction than before that Ava repeated, "that's not me." And Ciro almost believed her.

"Are you sure?" the Razor whined, and Ciro almost startled on reflex. He hated her so much. "I'm loving that look."

Voice of the Broken

She's been hollowed out. Just like us.

"You have a lot of nerve talking about someone like that," Clara warned.

"They didn't do that to your face," Ava snapped.

Do you know what I'm going to do to you?

The Narrator

There's not so much a moment of hesitation before she steps forward. Her chains pull taut, holding fast as she strains against them. The cuff around her wrist digs deeper into her skin. Blood drips from the place where metal meets flesh.

And then, with a nauseating sound, the skin tears. It plops to the ground, and she pulls her red, glistening arm free from her bindings. She is loose, and she is coming for you.

Voice of the Broken

She's only trying to connect with us. Wouldn't you want to dig for a spark once you lost it? To try to reignite something, even if it hurts?

Ciro hated Borja. He focused on that instead of the visions of skin tearing and a skeleton of blades hatching from an explosive wave of viscera that was once in the shape of a princess. He focused on that instead of how everything in the room seemed to sharpen, how his vision clarified beyond clarity, how his vision was tunneling and his blood roared in his ears.

How unfair it all was, how *they were screwed and he couldn't do anything— “are you ready for what comes next?”*—how he couldn't remember anything beyond everyone talking at once and the overwhelming noise and the skewering of sharpening blades and everything cutting out to—

(Instinct) (Demand) Listen!

He could hear the others cringing at how the princess on-screen had degloved herself.

[Instinct] (Reminder) Check your senses. They work together, not alone.

[Distrust] (Reminder) The images on the screen are not real. The flickers in your head aren't, either.

[Instinct] (Observation) There is no scent of death or rotting meat, nor is there a stink of metal in the air. The air is neither humid with blood nor chilled with metal. It is room temperature and of nondescript humidity. (Presence) You are not alone.

(Focus) Heart. Lungs. Liver. Nerves. (Collection) Heart. Lungs. Liver. Nerves.

He was gripping the mouse tighter. He willed it to be because he was angry, not afraid.

[Instinct] (Focus) One thing at a time. You need to make a decision.

*(Sincerity) Being the Decider **sucks!***

- "What happened to you?"
- "Wait! We don't have to do this!"
- "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry for what I did to you!"
- "Please just listen to me!"
- "I'm going to end you." [Slay the Princess]
- [Slay the Princess.]
- [Let her end you.]

"I get the impression she's not in a talkative mood!" Connie joked as Ciro flicked the mouse to the second-to-last option. The last one...

[Instinct] (Warning) Don't be suspicious, if you take too long they'll know something's up.

...he'd keep it in mind. But for now he had to keep moving.

"Stalling for time's never a bad move," Oli suggested.

"Or at least try and get some answers," Harri said. "If you can't distract her with thinking, at least think for yourself. A question's a question."

“There’s no (*Explore*) prefixes...” Tabi said, lower than the other two. Her focus was intently engraved onto the screen. “There’s no more time.”

Ciro knew what that meant in the end. Ava was never the type to think, she’d admitted it herself; and he’d be damned before he begged for mercy from someone who would never, ever grant it. He clicked the only option that made sense, before the others noticed the one at the bottom, too.

- [Slay the Princess.]

The Narrator

Your heart free of fear, you charge towards the Princess, your eyes locked on each other, both of you prepared to lay down your very essence in one blow.

Voice of the Stubborn

It's now or never, let's make it a beautiful blaze of glory!

The Narrator

With a horrifying squelch, you are unwound.

Tabi was the one to stand up in a flash, that time. Her face was impassive, though pale, and she’d managed a frigidly monotone “I’m checking on Dami” before she walked with a noticeable haste to the kitchen.

Ciro couldn’t understand what had happened right away. It didn’t seem possible. He froze. Completely out of thoughts. He latched onto... onto...

Voice of the Hero

No, no, no, that's our stuff! She can't just do that.

The Narrator

She just did. Unfortunate, I know, but reality is reality.

...*feathers*. Between all the things he couldn’t identify, there were feathers in the mass. A silent horror built throughout his body, stopping him in place, pinning him where he sat. Agonizingly slowly, recognition trickled down on him in a dripfeed. He’d seen those feathers before—

Voice of the Cold

Huh. It's like I said. Our insides do look like the cabin. In the end, we're all just meat.

Voice of the Stubborn

'In the end?' Just because she's ripped us open doesn't mean this is over.

Voice of the Hero

How is it *not* over?

—he'd seen them on Quiet's new wings. Colored like the sky, not... not bloodstained and plucked and in pieces in yet another murder scene that shouldn't have happened.

She had only clenched her fists and yet Quiet had unspooled. She hadn't even touched him, there wasn't even an attack he could have seen coming. Somehow, this was even more bullshit than Ciro's own murderer.

(Determination) It's not over.

[Intellect] (Daze) What am I looking at?

(Answer) (Pragmatism) Meat.

(Answer) (Instinct) Death.

Ava seemed to agree with Harri. "What is that?"

"Now *that's* an unwinding," Clara sang, turning to Ava with a sort of manic approval in her eyes. "What's the technique?"

Some of Ava's energy returned as she balked at the question. "I can't do that! Why would I want to do that? What's the point in that, where's the intimacy, where's the risk? He didn't even close the distance. She didn't give him the chance. It's not a fight if he never had a chance!"

"You're saying that like we're out for the count," Gonchi defended. His bravado had a certain edge to it. Funny how 'determination' and 'desperation' had such similar sounds to them; funny how Ciro felt himself clinging to both and rendering the distinction null and void. There had to be *something* they could do.

"Yeah, let loose a little!" Razor smiled like a shark. "He can stitch himself back together again. A chapter's never been this short, there's *gotta* be more to see!"

"What is wrong with you?" Winnie said, almost whispering. Ciro only caught it because of the way his thread wove around her, seemed to be stretching thin and tightening— oh, the flowers on her forehead were starting to take his hue, that might be concerning.

"Nothing's wrong with me! I didn't know she could be so creative!"

Ciro hated her. He *hated* her. The way she had cut through them no matter what they did, hated her smirk, how she had regarded them as nothing but an entertainment, her blades that she wielded so easily, her thoughtless cruelty.

She hurt them. She hurt them more than he thought possible, than was conceivable. His thoughts stretched and pulled and twisted around it, veered wildly to avoid contact with it. *(He'd been doing so well. They'd felt something like... something like alright, or at least the*

promise of it.) It was worse than unforgivable; it was unthinkable. And yet, despite his avoidance, there it was, plainly for all to see. For them to speculate on, to question how to shape further, to theorize how to hurt worse. To judge.

It was why their wings were gone. (*Why it'd never be alright.*)

That on the screen couldn't be his body. Not in those shapes. Not in that form. And yet they talked about it like he wasn't really there, wasn't really hearing them, like they were nothing, nothing at all. (*And weren't they, in the end?*)

Spread out in more ways than one, evaluated and scrutinized; and the end result was that they were *disgusting*. *Vile*. *Nausea-inducing*. *Horrific*. *Scary*—

Those were not Ciro's thoughts. That was not Ciro's (*shame*), or (*revulsion*), or...

(*Disgust*) —*Hard to look at* .

[*Vitality*] (*Resolution*) Did **she** tell you that? *Doesn't matter, I'll end her either way.*

His eyes refocused. His thread coiled so tight around Quiet it was hard to tell where he ended and they began. It was a direct line from him to them, only the briefest intermission for Winnie's sake— and even she seemed to be slipping from his priority. He'd pulled back into himself, for the time being, but he would not pull away. Couldn't. They were falling apart at the seams. He had to keep them together. They'd done a good job by curling up— less surface to cover— but he just *couldn't*—

"That's not true, killer, you're very pretty. Now..." Something was pulling him away from them and he rebelled all the more. *"C'mon, give me a little room to work with, here, pal. You're practically crushing us."*

...What?

He blinked again. Reassessing. He'd been hurting them? He hadn't noticed, had to stop a little. He felt, lightly, something like air pressing against him, a soft breeze that cooled him down.

His rage tempered just a little. He had to stay focused, even if the situation was insane, both in and out of the screen. He hated that princess on the screen too, how she was looking at them with... what was that expression? There was no fucking way she was *disappointed* with the consequences of her own actions, right?

Voice of the Broken

This is the only way it could have gone, really.

Voice of the Stubborn

Oh you are just insufferable, aren't you? Come on! We're better than this.

“Bullshit,” *Ciro* responded to the *Borja* on-screen, just to hear his own voice from his own mouth. How long had it been since he spoke verbally? Why did it feel so wrong? He wasn’t new at having a body anymore. Were old habits that hard to kill?

At least his vocal chords were still functioning.

Voice of the Hero

So... are we dead?

The Narrator

No.

Don't think that I'll allow you death here. I've made that mistake before. No. You will suffer until you see in me what I have seen in you.

(Recollection) (Horror) “By her whims,” again. (Resignation) Caught prey. Can’t even kick to break free.

He didn’t need to be looking at *Ave* to know how he shuddered.

“...What?” Oh. *Tabitha* was back, slotting back into place to *Harri*’s right. She looked a bit better than before. “What does that even mean?”

“She’s looking for our heart,” *Felipe* said, his voice a little low, as if testing out the words as they came from his mouth. “See, it’s always been so much more than senseless violence after all; she just wants to communicate. She just wants to be understood!”

“This is *nothing* like what it was before. This *isn’t* how...” *Ava* said, shuddering. *Ciro* didn’t know she was capable of *being* shaken. She steeled her shoulders and turned to *Felipe*, pointing at him and making a gesture like slitting a throat. “Stop talking for me. I don’t like being put into boxes, Mr. Heartthrob.”

“I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Shut up.”

Ciro focused on that. It was easier than looking at the screen. Not as easy to ignore the fact that this *Fury* had told them death was something she could choose for them. Dying to spite someone wasn’t something he would ever consider, but...

(Haste) (Warning) Mm, there’s no ‘but,’ mate. (Earnesty) It’s for the best you don’t think that way.

(Defiance) Well...

(Insistence) No.

Voice of the Cold

A challenge, then. Sure. Let's see how far we can take this.

(Shock) (Disbelief) (Ire) What is wrong with you?!

I'm perfectly healthy.

(Frustration) The body cannot survive this!

Survival is not a factor here.

- "And what am I supposed to see?"
- "You're a monster."
- 'Please, just talk to me! Can we not use words to settle our differences? We're both here for a reason. It's more important for us to figure that out than to fight.'
- "You won't win."
- [Attempt to die.]
- [Say nothing.]

Ave opened his mouth to speak.

"I know, Avito, I know."

- [Attempt to die.]

Voice of the Broken

Yes, I think that would be for the best.

It was funny how fast a choice could be regretted. He did not want to prove that prick right in his final moments. He did not want to prove him right in any moment, in no way, shape or form.

He said a quick "fuck you" in retaliation. How he wished Borja said anything so he could say more. Say worse.

Voice of the Hero

Can we even do that? Is death the sort of thing we can just decide to do?

The Narrator

You do your best to die, but try though you might, you find yourself... unable to perish.

Voice of the Stubborn

Good. Because we're not a quitter.

(Frustration) Bad! This is a bad thing to happen!

(Horror) Not dying...(Reluctance) Fine, you were right. I was... less right.

Did Ciro have to reserve a “fuck you” for Gonchi, as well? Because he was blaring it loud and clear in his thread.

The Narrator

Yes, hopefully this means there's still a chance for the world here.

Voice of the Broken

Don't you get it? It's too late. We've both changed too much. We're not the challenge she wants anymore. The spark is gone.

I can feel you attempting to slip away. Is that what you want, then? Are you so terrified of my desires that you'd prefer any escape at all? Are you so terrified of me that you prefer death to my company?

At least you're quiet now. At least you haven't fallen back on words.

They aren't music. They aren't dance. They aren't feeling.

The chimera bared her teeth in a shape that could have been approximating a smile on any other mouth. “Playing with your food, are you?”

She laughed, with a voice that could not have lived in those lungs. Her claws were big enough to hold him entire, yet Ciro had never learned how to flinch.

He risked a glance at Ave, and for a moment, he saw him dead as Quiet had been, in the bowels of the earth. His throat torn from his neck, his guts spilling from his body like it had melted, his bones— not white as he thought, but bloodied-pink— bared and snapped.

Never again, never again.

Ciro stared through her, unflinching.

The Narrator

Your eye, held far outside your skull by a thin stalk of nerves and viscera, stares back at her in unblinking silence.

Let's see what meaning we can find together. Let's see what we're made of.

The Narrator

Something infiltrates you. Though you do not see it, you feel it, slithering into your disaster of a body, seeping into the gaps between your molecules.

(Shock) What the— Again?!

[Paranoia] Constantly prying, prying, prying, to what end? When will they be done with us?

[Rebellion] (Reassurance) If she tries again, I can always throw something at her eye. That should distract her enough.

[Instinct] (Derision) That'd just make you dead.

[Rebellion] (Contentment) It'd be a good death.

The Narrator

The body of a sapient creature has, on-average, thirty trillion cells. And each one of those cells is composed of one-hundred-trillion-some-odd atoms.

A rock sinking into his stomach, that was what he was feeling. Because he had heard that before. Quiet was prompted and he gave it; the haunting opener to a living nightmare.

There's no such thing as stopping death. No person should decide death isn't a thing. This is agony.

It... couldn't last *that* long, right?

The Narrator

One of those cells is peeled from the others. One-hundred-trillion atoms are gone.

Are you still there? Are you still you?

Voice of the Hero

... Yes? I think?

The glass warps.

Voice of the Cold

Of course we are.

It felt like a certainty. They'd always be them, he'd always be him, she'd always be her. That he and Cain would agree on yet another matter, well, Connie wasn't exactly thrilled at the implications. Not especially *jazzed*.

But, "would," that was the thing, wasn't it?

Because Connie's sides were split by evidence of the contrary; that there was, somewhere, a breaking point at which one ceased to be 'themselves,' and became a stranger to themselves. ... And a stranger to those who would've loved them, had they never changed at all. Because there was some line that could be crossed, some threshold breached, some limit reached where a person had suffered as much as they could bear and had to either die or lose. Lose joy, lose emotion, lose memory, lose identity, lose their own life if the worst came to pass.

But... that final limit, it was removed. How much worse could it get if there was no “worst?” If finality didn’t exist? If there was no threshold, no boundary, no line between life and death; in which case, the former is reduced to nothing at all. Stripped, mechanically and systemically, of everything that gave it meaning.

How violated could a boundary be?

He didn’t want to find out.

But that was the thing about violating boundaries: the only thing that mattered was what *she* wanted. They had no choice in the matter.

The Narrator

Then two are peeled away. Then four.

Voice of the Stubborn

This is nothing. Nothing!

The Narrator

Eight. Sixteen. Thirty-two. Sixty-four.

Voice of the Broken

Whatever she does to us, we shouldn't hate her. She's been hurt so badly.

“Someone gets it!” the masked woman sighed, relieved, and Connie’s hair on the back of his neck stood up.

“What.”

“Look at what she did to herself because of what you did!”

“Yeah, ‘to herself,’ ” Nando said. “We had no part in it!”

“Not to lose track of the fact that *they’re* being hurt, too,” Ciro pointed out. He sounded like he was speaking through gritted teeth.

Winnie’s brambles, covering her shoulders, grew thorny and red. “They’re being hurt *worse*.”

“Like you have *any idea* what you’re putting her through,” Clara scoffed.

“*She’s* the one doing all this!” Ciro yelled.

Whatever was said next, Connie couldn’t hear it.

Voice of the Contrarian

Oh, is this a waiting game now? I hate waiting games.

Voice of the Cold

Ah, so the waiting is the torture. I do hate dull things.

There was a horror in agreeing that much with him. Connie would admit to himself he had not examined the ‘why’ too closely. He had a sinking feeling that wouldn’t be the last time he felt it, however much he wanted to.

The Narrator

One-hundred-and-twenty-eight. Two-hundred-and-fifty-six. Five-hundred-and-twelve.

Are you still there? Are you still you?

The Narrator

One-thousand-twenty-four. Two-thousand-forty-eight. Four-thousand-ninety-six. Eight-thousand-one-hundred-ninety-two.

Voice of the Broken

I feel... small. Smaller than before.

“Are eight thousand cells really that noticeable?” Connie didn’t know. If the limit was something-trillion, he seriously doubted it. That was a high number. He felt a flicker of irritation at such a high number, and then that irritation progressed into— into not something from himself, but something that was pulled in by a likeness. Waiting without having control or choice. That was terrifying, he didn’t want to think about that, didn’t want to think of himself and the others experiencing that. He didn’t want this. He wanted it over with.

Voice of the Contrarian

Yeah, we get it! There's a lot of numbers in us for you to count!

Voice of the Hero

Do you all feel that? I could have sworn I felt something.

(Incomprehension) You can't have, we didn't have bodies.

“*You don’t need a body to feel,*” Grace interrupted Harri's confusion. As if in demonstration, a flicker of frost inhibited the threads’ movements for a fraction of time; Connie felt it in something beyond himself, something indescribable. He wouldn’t call it a soul— he was running under the assumption little devils like him had none— but he didn’t have many other words to use for it. The marrow of his bones didn’t feel like enough. It was like... fingers, dancing along his skin, but if they were made of ice, and he were made of skin. Like the briefest caress.

...Whatever it was, it sure did feel! Grace was right on the money.

*“You were something, before, with some degree of tangibility. I **thought** you were shards of broken glass, but...”* She seemed not to have a further answer. Or she was looking for a way to explain it, to Harri or to herself. *“You did have a body: Quiet’s. You took up a space, a space just for you.”*

You had no body, but you felt a body suffer.

“You inhabited a space,” Grace rephrased, reinterpreted, insisted upon. *“And now... she’s picking that space apart.”*

The Narrator

Sixteen-thousand-three-hundred-eighty-four. Thirty-two-thousand-seven-hundred-sixty-eight. Sixty-five-thousand-five-hundred-thirty-six.

Voice of the Stubborn

You can't just count us into oblivion.

The Narrator

One-hundred-thirty-one-thousand-seventy-two. Two-hundred-sixty-two-thousand-one-hundred-forty-four. Five-hundred-twenty-four-thousand-two-hundred-eighty-eight.

Voice of the Hero

What happens when it gets higher? Like... really higher?

The reflection fractures.

Voice of the Cold

We die, probably.

Voice of the Contrarian

I dunno. They'll probably get even higher! There's a lot of numbers out there.

(Bluntness) (Sincerity) Cain, ¿vos sos o te hacés?

(Curiosity) Do you have a better idea of what happens?

*(Irritation) No, we’re **supposed** to, but we all know she won’t let us die.*

I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see.

“We refract some light right into her eyes and blind her.” They had no hands to grip the blade, but if they were bits of glass like Grace was saying, then there had to be something he

could do. He was never the most patient Voice, and having a body had only increased his need to always do *something*. Nothing was excruciating.

Harri sighed. "That only happens with mirror shards."

"Exactly my point, Detective."

"What is *taking so long?!*" the Razor complained.

"We won't be stuck like this forever," Tabi said under, or maybe within, her breath. "Things are changing; things are always changing. Look. The room's getting darker."

"Or are we just losing our vision?"

"Falling asleep," Ave said with something sickeningly close to hope in his voice. "The long sleep. It's beckoning."

"A pause. A breath, and then... somewhere new," Cain said like he was recalling a fond memory.

Voice of the Stubborn

Nothing. Just like nothing's happening now.

Voice of the Broken

But something is happening now. Something in us is liquifying. Something that started small, but that keeps getting bigger.

The Narrator

One-million-forty-eight-thousand. The hundreds don't matter anymore.

Are you still there? Are you still you?

The Narrator

Two-million-ninety-six-thousand. Four-million-one-hundred-ninety-two-thousand. Eight-million-three-hundred-eighty-four-thousand.

Voice of the Hero

I don't like this... waiting.

Voice of the Broken

Waiting for something to happen. But it's taking so long.

"I'm okay with nothing happening, actually," Oli commented. "If *something happening* is the alternative."

“What... is *going* to happen?”

Voice of the Cold

You're going to give up before you even start hurting, aren't you?

Voice of the Contrarian

Yeah, I'm out.

Connie had never been stabbed, not in his own route, not really. He was one of the very few there that had that privilege—and the dual privilege of appearing *after* Cain made it so the sharp one didn't really hurt anymore, didn't feel like anything. But he imagined that the horror spreading in his heart felt a little like that. Sharp and freezing and sudden. *Painful*.

That couldn't be right. That couldn't be what happened. Voices couldn't leave. He'd just said he wouldn't leave. He couldn't, he was better than that. **Cain couldn't be right about him.**

That, for whatever reason, was what set him off. The call and response, proven right and proven wrong, echoing between each other again and again and again across realities, that only ended when Connie did. When he couldn't take it anymore—or just when he decided to go, when he decided to abandon them, *before it even started hurting*.

He'd been there for them in that last cabin. By pure chance, but he had been there. And yet he had left.

Left. Gone. Out.

Who was left? Who would take care of them? Who cared?

Not him! Not Connie! Not the Contrarian! *But Cain was!*

He couldn't breathe. He *couldn't breathe!*

The room was getting darker. On the screen. The only things left were them and her and the things she would do to them—no, *the actual room* was getting darker, with it. He couldn't see the screen, anymore, at all, actually—couldn't see anything, anything but his own inadequacy. His own lack of presence. His own *lack*. His lungs were about to burst in his chest but his throat had closed up. Trapped, stuck, frozen, *he was dying—dying for real*.

Because one betrayal just wasn't enough? Taking their body's will wasn't enough, she had to take away any trust they had in him? Everything he had worked so hard for, to try and forgive himself for what he did in his own route? Just what kind of person was he, that he couldn't think of anyone beyond himself?

(Assistance) You don't have to start caring now.

He yanked away from the frost that started to gather in his thread as black spots danced in his vision. He couldn't think of anything to reply or recover with. Cain was already deep under his skin. He itched with frostbite. He still couldn't breathe. *He never would again.*

(Hurt) (Envy) It's better that you dipped when you could.

(Compassion) I don't want to see you hurt.

They had told him they'd missed him. They had told him they were p—

(Alarm) (Concern) [Breathe!]

...he did. Poorly. Shakily, incorrectly, in sharp gasps and shallow— he couldn't exhale, not when he needed air so desperately. He needed more air. His breath caught and hitched when he tried to expel it. But the air in his chest was bad and it burned and it was poison, he was suffocating in it, but how— he didn't know how to let it go.

-Heart, lungs, you're, an idiot—

What?!

He wheezed, a little, from the shock— wheezed a lot, actually, he was deflating like a balloon. He gasped, trying to suck the air back in. It was a discordant little rhythm and bordering on hysterics. But it was a rhythm.

-(Retaliation) And— (Panic) (Overwhelm) (Guilt) you're a— (Pride) (Hubris) lunatic!

(Relief) (Pride) Good, great. [Keep breathing.]

...He would. He did. He had to do something to make up for everything. He had to say—

(Comfort) It's okay. I'm not mad.

*(Reassurance) (Repression) I know **you** wouldn't do that.*

His breath hitched twice, rhythm broken and forgotten.

-(Alarm) Shit. (Reassurance) No, c'mon, buddy, you had it. You've got it. You're alright.

Tears pricked at his eyes. He was being strangled. Something was wrapping far too tightly around him; somehow, despite all evidence pointing to the contrary, this made it easier to breathe.

(Alarm) (Rephrasal) You helped me. In another time, even, you helped me beat this.

(Appreciation) Helped me several times over.

(Request) Please, I can't tell you about it if you don't [keep breathing.]

He could do that. That whole 'breathing' thing— he figured he was pretty good at it. Even with his scarf covering his mouth and all. Made things a little more difficult, but he could manage.

The room was brightening again. He decided to start coming up with something to say when breathing stopped feeling like a decision. This joke needed a witty punchline. The screen

remained dark, the screen he was not looking at.

When had Winnie gotten there? More importantly, when had she wrapped his scarf around herself? There was more than enough, don't get him wrong, but— oh. There were flowers pushing out of her body, trailing blood. Some on the hollow of her neck. It took Connie another second to recognize that she was saying something.

“—when the same thing happened to Dami you lot didn't laugh!” then she turned to him, lowering her voice. “This thread thing is pretty useful. Anyway, with the way things are going everyone here will have let them down at least once. I don't think you're one to do that. Not anymore.”

(Agreement) Yeah, something definitely must have gone wrong with your hatching there.
(Dismissal) Even Gonchi is being all weird.

He watched the realization that the girls had been listening in on them transform his expression. It was... kinda funny.

The Narrator

Sixteen-million-seven-hundred-sixty-eight-thousand. Thirty-three-million-five-hundred-thirty-six-thousand. Sixty-seven-million-seventy-two-thousand. Your eyes are useless. One-hundred-thirty-four-million. The thousands don't matter anymore. Your blood begins to go places it shouldn't.

Ciro moved to say something, then choked on his own words, only managing a weary “hoooly shit what's happening?”

Her whole body was *warping*. Like that time Connie and Ciro tried to paint and the water turned an ugly brown, but before it had been completely mixed. Distorted, edges undefined. Like light through hot air, like looking through the heat of a fire. Unnatural and abhorrent. Every hard surface becoming soft. Even the things that were not her body and shouldn't warp, like the nail stuck in one of her ribs.

“What does he mean, ‘our eyes are useless?’”

“I think I'd rather not have descriptions of what the numbers mean.”

“Do you think He only started describing because we couldn't see for ourself anymore?” Harri asked. “Does He *want* us to feel all this?”

“We had Dami as a first route,” Tabi recalled, “And when we resisted Him, He got a lot more descriptive.”

“He liked to go into detail, sometimes,” Quiet agreed, tone oddly wistful. He exhaled a sad little sigh that Connie wouldn't call a laugh. ““Extra detail, just for you.””

“The screen is still showing things,” Tabi pointed out. She glanced back at Quiet. Both of them seemed relieved by the fact they weren't watching the screen anymore.

(Inaccuracy) (Correction) I didn't have these kinds of visuals. (Discomfort) (Guilt) Could hear, for now. (Pain) Feel, for now.

(Trust) (Loss) I only had Him and you guys to rely on.

...And Connie left him behind? No. He'd be their eyes. Promise. He'd totally outrank the Narrator, too. Be way better at His job than Him, just to make Him look dumb.

"He did say He had a duty to tell 'facts as facts,'" Nando said, voice an eerie monotone, "so if the eyes were useless, the eyes were useless."

Are you still there? Are you still you?

Voice of the Stubborn

There's the pain, I can feel it now. But we can handle this. We can't let her win.

Voice of the Broken

Fighting the pain is just the same as wallowing in it. This doesn't have to be something where you win or lose. We just have to accept it. Listen to it.

"'I can feel it now?'" Harri quoted. "So you started feeling when it was more 'intense' things?"

"Or your space is being invaded... taken apart, pushed outside to fill in the gaps she created?"

"That can't be right." Oli squinted at the screen. "Fighting the pain is the complete opposite of wallowing, open a dictionary sometime."

"Not even getting into the logistics of 'listening' to pain," Harri muttered. "There's absolutely no reason for us to be 'accepting' it in any circumstances, let alone these ones."

"Pain is the easiest thing in the world to ignore," Cain agreed. Connie was relieved to find he still disagreed.

Voice of the Cold

If you make this about winning and losing, you're going to lose. You're too connected to your body.

"Pain is supposed to make you not want to feel it. It's an alarm," Ave retorted. Connie wasn't sure which Cain he thought he was talking to.

"Is the only time you deign to talk when you want to criticize Borja's every word?"

Connie had actually forgotten Felipe was there, with everything else that was going on. He didn't know how he even could.

“It’s not my fault everything he says is wrong!” *Ciro spat.*

“He’s been nothing but accurate!” Felipe retorted. “And compassionate to a wounded and weathered heart, despite how she’s lashed out.”

“‘Lash out’ is a tame way to put the liquefaction in progress,” Tabi interjected. “I thought this was her ‘seeking understanding’ or ‘reigniting a spark.’ And now you say this is ‘lashing out.’ Which one is it? Or is it neither?”

“Do you *not* see that?!” *Ciro gestured to the screen. Connie blinked away the afterimage of a projection that never was. “Did you not hear Him when he started describing the way we were breaking down?”*

Felipe blinked, his eyebrows furrowed. To Connie’s mild surprise, he actually looked to the screen for a moment before looking back to *Ciro. “...It’s a metaphor.”*

Connie had never seen *Ciro* quite so mad before. Which was astonishing, since he saw him mad *often*.

*(Bewilderment) (Rage) The fuck does he mean a metaphor? He's seen my scars! The pain we went through was real, the times we died were real. I won't be dismissed like that. It was real. It fucking **happened**.*

(Rage) (Resolution) I'm getting his things and dumping them on the front door. I've fucking had it. He's not welcome. Fuck's sake, he would've killed Quiet if we let him.

(Agreement) And me, too. Don't leave that part out.

(Rage) (Bloodlust) Why stop there? We're already killing Borja.

*(Threat) (Promise) **I'm** killing Borja.*

(Offer) (Compromise) It can be a team effort. We'll all get a good stab in, one for each of us. (Inclusion) You, too, Quiet.

(Surprise) Um. No?

Why not? He's already stabbed you. Return the favor.

(Submission) (Experience) 'Returning the favor' is why 'chapter threes' exist.

The only reason any 'chapter' has to exist is to see something new.

Ciro's jaw dropped as a dual sense of familiar dread and righteous fury lit up through the threads. It would appear, on the outside, like a delayed response of shock to what Felipe said. Connie was faintly amused by the fact that Felipe, as much space as he tried to take up in the room, was so easily disregarded. Not forgotten, though.

Connie wondered how the sight of Fury’s gore hadn’t shaken Felipe like it had Dami; how she’d grown sick at the sight, and how he all but broke into song about its beauty. How could

their reactions differ so greatly if they were two of a pair?

(Disagreement) Ehhh...

(Confusion) 'Ehhh?'

(Persuasion) He'll think about it.

(Confession) I, for one, am not opposed to this plan.

(Shock) You too?

(Pride) All for it, actually.

The collective's train of thought was graciously interrupted by a loud *SLAM* as Ava punched the wall. It cracked and dented under the force. She was making eye contact with Felipe in such a way that it was self-evident that she wished the wall and his skull would switch places, damage included and gratuitously exaggerated.

"My *life*," she grit out through sharp, clenched teeth and heaving breaths. "Is not. A *metaphor*. None of anything that we've gone through is a *metaphor*. Every drop of blood, sweat, and tears was *real*. And it was important. Get that through your thick head!"

He couldn't fathom how Felipe didn't seem afraid.

"You have to have some compassion for *yourself* before you start worrying about other people," Oli said, after a long, long pause. To his credit, Felipe looked genuinely taken aback by the statement—for all of three seconds maximum, before he shook his head and his expression cleared to what looked like frustrated betrayal.

"You aren't listening to me!"

"Enough." Plethora sighed.

The Narrator

Two-hundred-sixty-eight-million. We don't need to count anymore. Your lungs fill with liquid. You smell things you shouldn't. You choke on pieces of what used to be you.

Voice of the Stubborn

It doesn't matter, because we're still alive!

Connie wasn't sure if it was appropriate, but privately, he was deeply relieved that the Narrator had finally stopped counting. He'd finally gotten bored, hadn't He? He'd skip ahead for them out to the something-trillion Quiet had spoiled, and this whole nightmare could be over and done with.

He glanced over at Quiet, who'd gone back to not facing the screen, knees to his chest. His shoulder almost touching Connie's own. Breathing wasn't a decision anymore. Connie didn't

come up with a punchline, though.

It was surely inappropriate to wish Quiet was leaning into him a little more, so he felt solid. Or that Connie could lean into him, so he felt like he was giving anything of value back after his outburst. It didn't have to be all about him. He didn't have to be so self-centered; he could try to be better. It was just—the almost-touch was excruciating.

...right, appropriate or not, Quiet could still hear him. The way they leaned more fully felt very intentional.

The Narrator

You are deconstructed. You are reconstructed. A square you. A round you. A you with too many legs. A you with many mouths which won't stop screaming. Then all of it pressed into a ball, tightly packed into the size of a fist.

Let it be known and let the records show that Connie absolutely hated this. Quiet, from what he could tell, was very much not looking at the screen, and for good reason.

He was feeling nauseous, himself. He never needed to see a body turned into plasticine.

The image was of the Princess' body, but it wasn't that hard for his traitorous imagination to conjure Quiet's body being diced like a vegetable, each tooth without the roots and each facial feature with one square each. The light unable to leave their eyes, veins and arteries still pulsing with a phantom heartbeat, for all they were was wholly disconnected.

Something else. No defined edges, all bones malleable, the teeth losing their edges and bits of flesh trailing behind the whole like little slugs. They made short, aimless trails away from the main mass—a blur of flesh, still in pieces. In the center of it were bloated organs, if they could still be called as such, unrecognizable and indistinct from the general mass if not for their bright, angry red coloration. The jaw was in piecemeal, lower disconnected from the rest of it, the side meant to connect it to the upper drifting at its side. Eyes still there, frightened.

Something profane. Material being used to remake what was never intended to be remade. A copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of the same thing, self-replicating and useless all the same. Unnatural.

Something that shouldn't be, as people only ever had one mouth, one face, and lips weren't the same as legs weren't the same as arms; yet there were faces, faces, faces who 'wouldn't stop screaming;' faces stacking and crumbling and smearing into each other; mouths that opened to spiraled flesh that twisted in on itself endlessly as if trying to escape its own cursed creation, all that wasn't bound to the form it was forced into digging and melting into itself; teeth, too many teeth, in places teeth weren't meant to be; cancerous growths, not taking into account structure or reason or sanity; and yet there were legs made of recycled hands and finger joints, pressed in and wrong; combatting the urge to reach out, to instead walk on limbs that weren't limbs; and he felt phantom pain that nearly made him slip away once more.

Then, compression, swirling. Like before. Like with his Stranger (*no no no no no no that's not fair not fair you can't do that no no no no*) but worse. So, so much worse. There were no eyes, no muscle, no sinew, no limbs, no bones. Just flesh, or something that looked like it, pressed tightly together until it couldn't possibly be any tighter.

Seeing was impossible. Hearing was impossible. Screaming, he was sure, was impossible.

The lump of flesh and blood looked like a worm, a little bit. Like a fetus, something with a half-defined shape. Awake and in pain. Why? Why did she do that, what did they do to deserve all of that?

He couldn't move. He could only sit. Watch. Wait.

Harri appeared to have a stronger stomach than Connie had thought. "Why's it showing her body? Why this insistence on not showing ours?"

"Do you *want* to see—" Ciro caught himself, "see us like that?"

"*Yes!*" Razor practically shouted. Ciro flinched. "This is incredible. The ingenuity, the creativity, I hadn't even considered bodies that look like *that* before!"

"Bodies aren't supposed to look like that."

"Well, I love it!" Razor cheered, her wide and sharp-toothed grin wide with a manic fervency. Her eyes, her stare, was piercing in its fascination with the events on-screen. She looked enthralled. No, worse. She looked *excited*.

"No," Harri denied gruffly. "Absolutely not, I never want to see any of us in a state like this. But there's a discrepancy between what He's describing and what we're being shown, and I want to know why that is."

Voice of the Hero

What does 'you' even mean anymore? We just keep changing into horrible things we can't control. Make it stop. Please make it stop. Please make it stop.

Guilt and empathy churned together in his stomach. It hurt. Everything hurt. It hurt so much he *couldn't feel anything anymore. Everyone was gone. No one else is here. 'There is only her, and you. That's all there ever was.'* This—what you are—is everything.

(Guilt) (Agony) (Submission) But there is nothing left to stop anything.

But there is nothing left to stop anything. Your consciousness drifts towards hers.

"Killer?"

(Helplessness) (Apprehension) (Anticipation) [There is nothing to say.]

"Quiet?"

- "Why did you keep me alive?"
- "I've been here so long."
- "Everyone is gone."
- "There's no one else here."
- "I can't feel anything anymore."
- "But still, I'm here. Watching."
- [There is nothing for you to say.]

It's all hollow. I ripped you to pieces. I broke your will. But it means nothing.

But perhaps there is a way to grant you understanding. Perhaps there is a way to make myself whole once more.

"After everything she's done to you, she chooses to do more? No. NNNNO. This isn't happening." Grace's frantic breaths, like puffs of cold air, pushed him out. He could feel his thread being moved— like hastily pushing off a poorly-textured cloth itching against skin, untangling threads and strings from around them and her. But he was the string. *"Listen, it's okay, you're alright. Let me help you here, you're strangling yourself in all this."*

Something in the dream distorted, shivered, and died. The dream died with it. He wasn't sure where he was without it. It was dark.

*"Listen, are you there? **Come back to me!**"*

...And Connie was, abruptly, back in his own body. He blinked again and again, eyes momentarily too sensitive for even the glow of the screen.

"What's the thing in the dark waiting for?" came from Winnie. "Why hasn't It taken her away? It's not like they can walk away from the cabin when they're like that. It can take us when we're still in the basement, I *know* it can."

"She still has something to offer them," Plethora said.

"Who? The Thing?"

"Ava." And they nodded at, pointed to, cringed away from, shunned the screen.

"I said *THAT IS NOT ME!*"

"Where did you end and she begin?" Plethora asked, pondered, *joked*. Their expression contorted into a serene smile, eyes closed with raised eyebrows and hands pressed to their chest. Their expression contorted into dramatics, eyebrows furrowing with their question. Their expression contorted into a *playful wink*. Connie shivered. "When did 'you' start being yourself? When did 'she' cease to be you?"

"When 'she' beat someone to death when they were running," Gonchi answered, practically smoking at the mouth.

Plethora smiled, frowned, did not react at all and continued watching the screen. Nodded along to Gonchi's proposed answer, raised a hand to stop and silence him, shook a head in

disagreement. “The path deviated much earlier. It’s an interesting question ‘she’s’ been asking, is it not?... Are ‘we’ still ‘us?’”

No, Connie almost answered. *No, you aren't.*

...A pang of guilt. *We didn't fix you in time.*

Harri, Connie was surprised to note, shivered at the question. He pinched the bridge of his nose and looked to the ceiling a moment, taking a deep sigh, then pressed his glasses hard into his face as if either testing at what pressure they would break or trying to imprint their shape into his face.

*(Repression) (Bite back) Fuck off with that question, I know what you're doing. (...Concern)
Quiet, talk to me.*

Voice of the Stubborn

'You' means we exist! There has to still be a way for us to win. Otherwise this would be pointless and all this torture would be for nothing.

Voice of the Broken

You're right about one thing. It is torture. But it isn't pointless. The whole point is that it's torture.

The mirror shatters.

Voice of the Cold

Yes. She's torturing us. That's the whole point of this exchange. Haven't you been paying attention?

(...Payback) Look at you two, having things in common.

Hm.

(Indignation) He and I could not be more different—

(Annoyance) That was not an invitation to speak!

(Ire) Fuck off!

(Anger) Shut up.

Are you still there? Are you still you?

Voice of the Stubborn

YES!

At the same time, he could have sworn he heard Borja utter a ‘no.’ If only. If only.

The Narrator

The ball is unraveled into the shape of a body. The skin peels off in a corkscrew. The eyes are plucked. The organs arranged in the air in a neat row.

Are you still there? Are you still you?

Voice of the Broken

It's okay to let go.

Voice of the Hero

Then I'm letting go.

The threads...

...slipped, for just a second, like they were falling.

And, for just a second, it was like they were not even there.

Gone, missing, lost. *Shattered*. Like the link that tethered them all together, that bound them to each other, had simply ceased to be. It was familiarity, it was something they grew accustomed to, it was something each of them were integrated with and embraced, it was normalcy and peace and it was home. And it was... gone.

No static. No feedback. No bleedthrough. There was no presence for them to feel the edges of or to lean into in some space equally as far away as it was close by. A complete and sudden and violent independence; they were alone, and so very empty.

It was quiet.

(Immobility) (Love) (Loss) (GRIEF) Where did you go?

Quiet, but for his thoughts.

It was dangerous falling in love with a god. Nando knew that. He remembered every time he saw Borja. He remembered every time he was left breathless when Quiet's eyes turned into that intoxicating silver. He remembered when he saw the fatal scars on Quiet's skin, yet he still lived and breathed next to him.

It was dangerous being in love with a god. Nando *knew* that. He promised not to be like Borja, devoting his very being and worshipping the ground the divine being walked on; he would be careful in taking every chance to prove his loyalty. He promised not to take for granted the glow in Quiet's eyes or the color of his wings or the living warmth of his body; he would respect the inherent, unknowable, awe-striking power contained in each. He promised not to ever allow those scars to be repeated; he would protect him, he would be

there, he would hold him together. But it was still dangerous, no matter his promises and what he would do.

It was dangerous to love a god because he'd grow to believe he'd save him.

It was a dream, almost, to think about the possibility of everything going well, of being able to find the opportunity to escape successfully. Another unattainable fantasy he would never see. Because reality called, rung through his soul and crushed his heart in his chest, and blared light like the sun through a screen. Dawn had broken, and the time for dreaming was over.

Through the light, he suddenly saw himself at the gates of Death herself after discovering that his freedom was further from what was thought.

Through the light, he suddenly saw himself giving up, letting go, letting his only friend be tortured worse than whatever he was feeling within the confines of that metal box.

Through the light, he suddenly saw himself more alone than he ever knew he could be before, with a silence that echoed the content of his thoughts better than any mirror could reflect his tears.

The dream was breaking (at least for him) and it hurt; it *hurt* to feel Quiet cry and scream and *collapse* without betraying any inner turmoil. Not physical movement. Not something they could express on the screen. The first fraction of a second, before—

No static, no hum of the threads, utter unnatural silence. Missing. Alone. Gone and never coming back. Gone. Forever.

A nightmare, it was meant to be. A time of once upon a never. Another nightmare of a lie. Something that couldn't be, an impossibility made real. The reverberation inside him hurt, a memory of a mirage. *The body hurt, the decider was gone, she had taken them with her, she had killed them, he wanted them back—*

The nightmare was real, and it was waking. It was a dead certainty. No matter the memories he did not have, he *knew* it. He had felt the missing chunk of his heart before. Just like Quiet had. *But Quiet didn't leave willing—*

(Ache) (Loneliness) Why did you leave me?

Nando wasn't sure which of the two said it.

Because he did, he came to believe at some point that he could be saved. Even if Quiet wasn't a god. Gods took and took and *took*, love and sanity and lives; and Nando had to place things in Quiet's hands, and they'd still insist they weren't deserving. He came to believe it would be possible, but...

Through the light, he saw a Hero he never was, someone he never wanted to be. Giving up, the first to give in and leave Quiet to untold centuries of pointless torture. (The word burned

into him. Another crime against them he stood by for, let happen, and this time didn't even suffer with them for.)

His screen self, did he think of that at all? Did he think it was a respite? Did he die praying Quiet would find a way to save him? He *couldn't*, not by himself.

The Voice on the screen wasn't him. It couldn't be possible. He was certain of it. The same way he felt something the first time Paco took an impromptu nap on the sofa even if there were people around. Felt something the first time he saw a sunset. The first time he heard Quiet laugh. A certainty, beating on time with his heart.

He didn't want to die.

—*I want to live I want to live I want to live*—

(Panic) (Love) (Denial) I can't follow you.

Avellano had always known death could be just around the corner from the moment he hatched. But *knowledge* isn't the same as *experience*. When Ave thought he would die, when he was *burning*, he hadn't been alone.

Something was wetting his cheeks. He couldn't think, instinct dampened by his too-tight throat, left unable to breathe. He couldn't breathe if the others wouldn't, too. He wasn't supposed to be alone. A flock was better than the lone hunter.

Quiet locked themselves with a beast, and Hero and Hunted followed, damned be reason. Hero tried to think while they dodged, and Hunted followed. Nando tried to live peacefully, and Ave followed. Nando—

Quiet stepped through the door of a basement with Hero at their heels, and Hunted followed, damned be dread. Hero ran to make his name proud and Hunted followed, trembling hands and steady heart. Quiet ran, and he ran, and he ran, and Hero and Hunted followed.

Quiet ran. Hero—

Hero—

Hero stopped.

That was never supposed to happen. That had *not* happened. They could still run, they could still follow. Make them want to run once again.

(Anguish) I'm right here.

He wanted to shout.

(Anguish) Look at me.

Grief. noun: *deep and poignant distress; very great sadness*. see also: *love, despair, heartache*.

Harri should have seen that coming. Everything that was established as 'normal' had been going down the drain ever since the chapter started. Something was always going to give.

Even if they were all together, able to hear and converse with each other without speaking aloud, even if Quiet said it was just like before, there were key factors that proved that wrong.

Their memories and perceptions didn't overlap before, a Voice could influence a Voice but not that much. Before, everyone remembered the same things and the memories didn't steal time away from them. No matter how interlinked they were, they never lost themselves in each other like it happened more than once thus far.

And they all had bodies, so they knew Quiet was there, and alive, and Fer was also there, he hadn't died. They just weren't able to reach them at the moment. Not with their threads. Fer was still there, clinging to Quiet, like he needed to ~~check their pulse and breathing and awareness, like he needed to get them up and moving and out of there, like he needed to walk them out of there and back home where it was safe. And Harri could do that because they were still alive, would still be alive even if Harri couldn't be the one who made plans anymore because he had wanted to return too and he should have planned for this and he couldn't die from heartbreak that was ridiculous but his body was giving it its best shot.~~

There were key factors that all unlocked one answer. Quiet was ~~falling apart in front of him~~ not okay. This ~~breakdown~~, this *malfunction* proved it in spades. The link between cause and effect was elementary. One problem, one solution. Simple math.

(Resolve) *We're getting out of here. All of us.*

[*There is nothing to say.*]

...Oh. This is new. It's *silent*.

The silence loses its luster fast; the allure of a new experience can only last so long, and this one was only a brief shock before the numb crept back in.

The silence holds.

At least it juxtaposed well with the noise from earlier. The others were so very loud. They talked so very much, their discussions jumping erratically left and right, the fires of their souls burning so very bright with the beating of their hearts—

And now. Now there was nothing to entertain himself with.

It's familiar, but... dull. Far too dull. The space he inhabits is far, far too empty; empty without what he needs to fill it. It's like boredom, he supposes, but worse. He wasn't aware this was possible, really. He'd always been able to find them before.

The silence holds.

He can still see his thread. They aren't gone. It's just a convincing illusion; it will pass.

The silence holds.

The thread is limp, slack, and dead. It is transmitting loss to him. It feels like *less* than nothing. He prefers nothing, over this. And he prefers them, over nothing.

It was so much more interesting with them around.

The silence holds.

He reminds himself they are still very much there.

He considers offing himself, to stop this. He loops his thread around the Decider another few times. It drapes around them lightly. Another few times. It tethers around them tightly. Another few times. He strangles their heart under his hold and he *still* cannot feel their pulse. Another—

The silence holds.

...Himself. 'Himself.' Hm.

The silence holds.

Cain decides he never wants to feel this ever again. He will ensure it.

You're never escaping me.

(...Love?) [There is nowhere for it to go.]

No, wrong. Love wasn't supposed to hurt.

Ciro hated the excessive noise and the nonstop arguments and the pointless bickering over stupid bullshit, but right when there was a crisis situation that required critical attention, they all went deaf and mute. Oh, par for the fucking course. Ciro despised every moment they were stuck in that house of horrors, and their forced return pissed him off all the more, but somehow that really was the cherry on top of the bullshit sundae. That was the loudest silence of his life.

That was bullshit, Quiet told them they were supposed to be gods. Gods, by definition, were immortal. Gods couldn't just die like that, dying wasn't something they were supposed to be able to choose so lightly.

The fuck was Borja thinking, telling Nando to *die* for?

But the situation was unfair, the chapter even moreso. Everyone broke eventually, they had seen enough the last time they were there. An unfairness so deep the laws of reality itself bent to its whims. To *her* whims.

How could they give up like that, how was there even a way for them to do that? They had gone through worse! He'd *seen* them go through worse! And the others didn't leave that time!

And now Quiet was left— *no*, wrong, Quiet *had been* left with Borja. Alone and defenseless. And Quiet *now* wasn't fucking *listening to him*—!

He wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of crying out his pain. All he had to do, all he could do, was make sure they could get away. Get Quiet to answer. Never set foot in that house again if he could help it.

(Anger)

(Love) (Desperation) (Bargaining) (Grief) ***I'll do anything.***

Oli had just seen the surface of the damage, before.

She wove her lies like threads in a loom. She spun them, twisted them, knotted them into one tight coil. And Quiet had gone with her. Not because they believed her, no, his boss was smarter than that, but because killers were patient with prey that crawled to them willingly.

In this case? In *this* case? The patience was part of the digestion process.

It was a smart trick, and he could respect it, but he could also respect himself, and the latter seemed a lot more well-incentivized than the former. So he had it in his best interest to step far, far away from this web of lies he'd unintentionally walked into and caught himself in and may or may not have woven a bit himself. He had it in his best interest to recognize, oh, *that was* what "*love hurts more than anything I've ever experienced*" meant, boss was using a code-word she'd loaned him.

Funny that he seemed to only remember the meaning of the actual word when it was primed to rip his heart out of his chest. Why did Quiet love so brutally? He was *not* a fan of it, and yet his door had been unlocked and wide open for it— and— and he was swinging the door open wider, now, really, trying to welcome them back in, because *wow* was this shunning starting to get to him.

(Unconditionality) (Acceptance) (Welcome) You've done everything you need. You deserve a rest.

(Grief) Come back.

She had never been mourned. She had no name to speak of, no identity, no family that would miss her when she died.

Grace was starting to realize she did not want to be mourned, if it felt like this. She didn't know it hurt so much. It wanted to crush her. Cause of death: absence. A lack. A gaping chasm that swallowed all good in the world.

Grief burned from the inside like a fire. What did that mean, if she could feel it? If she could feel everything trapped inside no matter what she did to soothe it? Quiet wasn't answering her. Lost in that memory of pain. *"Hey now, they're all here, killer, see? And even if something were to happen, we both know from my experience it won't stick, we're all just gonna haunt you 'til the end of time and you're **certainly** not losing me."* She'd have to keep trying. She couldn't breathe, and—

Huh?

There was something.

No, grief wasn't the thing crushing her so her heart felt like it was about to pop out of her chest. There was something else.

She'd been trying to tighten most threads, apologizing to her... possessee?... to her killer before touching them. One of the threads had the very opposite problem.

It had to have gone dead and limp under the weight of the emotional burden, like the others, but rather than drifting back and falling down, it had latched on harder, taking in more. Obviously wrapped far too tight in its desperation. Not only restricting their breathing, but inhibiting movement of the heart— and trapping Grace down below in the depths of their soul. It felt like it was trying to find, breach, be let into something.

With the weight of it pressing in on her and them both, it was hard to identify who this one belonged to—but, nevertheless, it was binding them all the same.

She couldn't find an end to it, she couldn't cut it either. She tried to put her hand between the thread and the heart, finding some room to move. Then she'd get to work.

"It's a bit crowded, here, killer; between all the people who love you; I'll have to make some renovations."

Just for a second; and the second passed.

Something changed. Something slotted in place. Something beyond thoughts of worth and pain and loneliness. Something unspooled.

He could breathe again. There was someone beside him. Someone important. Someone who needed him. So he couldn't give up, he couldn't be gone.

His eyes opened.

The room was as it was a second ago. It was hard for Nando to believe only a second or so had passed. But everyone was in the same positions. There was a faraway look in some of their eyes; the girls, from what he saw, didn't share it, but they did share between themselves a sort of mixture between shock and horror. It reminded him of what the rest of the room looked like when they saw his last appearance in Clara's route. That *other* time he'd embraced death. He didn't look at the screen because, logic following from everything else, he knew what he'd see and he didn't want to review it all a second time.

It was quiet; but the noise, the feedback, the pulse, it was all there. He saw the twirling mass of threads waking up from a shared nightmare, stiff from tension rather than rigor mortis. There had to be a better word for the 'quiet' from that hellish second compared to the 'quiet' now. To...

He looked to his side. His throat tightened. His hands, still in theirs, clenched. Their eyes found his. Bright, shining, aware. He never knew grey could look so saturated, so alive and merciful.

Chills ran from his hand up and down his spine as if limbs of their own, in comfort and in praise, holding him. The hairs on the back of his neck raised.

Without further warning, Quiet *lunged*.

If they were in a better place, Nando knew without hesitation, their wings would have spread with the motion and enveloped him alongside their arms—knew he would have been stolen away, possibly never to return—knew he would have been pressed into them from all angles, infinite angles, from soft down feathers of a color he never could name with a mass he could never calculate and a fluff he could've sank into forever and breathed a scent he could not identify as anything but them and theirs—knew he would have fallen, fallen, fallen—

He knew they were doing a fine replication of it just with their arms, though. They might've not been able to fully conceal him within themselves, but they were pressing themselves into him as if trying to physically bind them both together. Caught off guard, he was pushed backwards as they leaned into, partially onto, him. Their arms wrapped around and pushed against his back, keeping him stable and free from falling. Though he wasn't sure he would've minded.

Soft, warm, safe.

He could breathe again.

There they were.

Voice of the Cold

Sigh.

(Ire) Why do you sound like you're fucking disappointed, conchudo hijo de puta. Pajero de mierda.

(Surprise) (Realization)

(Recognition) (Ease) I'm not disappointed.

And then everyone else noticed, too. Connie's head snapped to him as the whole of him became looser and relaxed. "I'm glad you're still here." He almost couldn't hear him.

"Me too."

(Anger) (Distraction) (Relief) You're back.

(Resolve) (Worry) Never do that again.

(Agony) (Correction) Neither of you.

(Resolve) (Thirst) What happened?

(Truth) I missed you.

Once. Twice. Thrice. A pattern. Like they couldn't stop themselves from saying it. Like there was any chance they could misunderstand. And even then, he felt them starting to slip.

(Truth) ...Us too.

*(Guilt) ... (...Realization) (Levity) Where's **my** hug?*

Voice of the Stubborn

Yes.

The screen wasn't forgotten (how could it be?), but it'd been the lower priority for the time. Nando tried to conceptualize the gore on-screen. The gore of his friend. The gore that killed him.

It was everywhere: bare skin, plucked of feathers and unraveled in thin, ribboned trails so that the angry red flesh of its bottommost layer was clearly visible in the spiral; yellow-white nerves, exposed to open air and colliding with the rest of it all, branched out like vines across the scene, one strand caught between the Princess's teeth, several warping and wrapping around her hand; intestines with thick red and blue veins and arteries and livers and kidneys and masses of flesh inferred to be organs that Nando hoped he'd never need to identify based on sight; so much blood; and, in the top-right, an eyeball still connected to its ocular nerves mere moments off from being caught in the Princess's palm. The Princess, the *Fury*, herself,

remained perfectly intact. No longer acting as mimic or mirror to Quiet's condition. Simply relishing in the spoils of it, watching him unfold, splattered with his blood. Showering in it.

"No. This isn't happening," Ava answered back. In a tone that made Nando think she, or maybe another someone with a feminine voice, had spoken earlier in the longest second of his life. She begged, voice aching and panicked, though it was utterly wrong coming from her voice. "This isn't right. It isn't fair. It has to stop."

Gonchi, beside her, tugged her arm into an embrace with his own. "That's not you."

"But it's *you*."

"*I'm* right here."

The Narrator

You are stretched into a line, twelve feet long. Then twenty-four. Then forty-eight. The line gets thinner as you get longer. A mile. Two. Four. Eight.

Are you still there? Are you still you?

Voice of the Stubborn

...Yes.

The Narrator

Sixteen. Thirty-two.

Voice of the Stubborn

...

The scene changed again. Distorted, as if viewing through a thick barrier or film, as if looking out from a dark place they were trapped in, or as if she were looking in at them, the image of the Fury stretched diagonally. And stretched. And stretched. It was getting darker.

There was a dip in his stomach. Silence was bad; he learned that very, very forcefully just earlier. Silence from Gonchi was a whole other beast; that should not have been *possible*.

They couldn't leave Quiet alone. But— no, there was still... no, that was *worse*.

The Narrator

Sixty four.

Voice of the Stubborn

No.

It was a flash-freeze. Quiet became dead weight in his arms. Simply fell against him like a puppet with its strings cut, cut away from them one-by-one, limp.

The faintest flicker of an image behind his eyes. He could barely catch it. *'Unwound again.'* Watching without eyes. The sensation of something inside of him, changing, untethering, knitting; threads of him and strands of her between each other, slithering into—

The image stopped, the line went dead.

Eyes unfocused into someplace unseen that would not be followed into nor readily recovered from. They didn't have to keep their eyes open anymore. Not if they were tired. Nando raised his palm to their face and closed their eyelids for them, the way one would for the dead. The way a person would to a corpse. So it would only appear to be sleeping.

The question to ask was all but answered. So instead he just tucked them closer. Whispered, gently, into feathered hair, "I've got you."

[Terror] (Worry) Wait, this isn't right, they were back!

[Understanding] Not really. Not completely.

[Levity] (Acceptance) That's fine, he can sleep.

[Opportunism] (Responsibility) We'll take it from here.

The Narrator

One hundred-and-twenty-eight.

Voice of the Broken

I'm still here.

"Why the fuck is he still there?!"

"Would you truly rather he be dead and you alone than this alternative?" Felipe, to no one's approval, jumped to Borja's defense.

Nando got the distinct, almost overpowering impression that Quiet should never be alone in these circumstances. It seemed like a notion that should be common sense, but there was an urgency— a twisted mix of relief that Quiet still had *someone* to stabilize him and *dismay* with who it turned out to be, but a dead certainty that *anything* was better than complete obliteration of their self. Oblivion. Death.

There was a silent horror in the realization that he hadn't forgotten what that hellish second felt like. He likely never would, despite how directionless the echo was.

Quiet had missed them, and it tore him apart.

“No,” Nando answered in their place, his voice shakier than he intended it to come out as. Felipe and Ciro stalled in place, their argument paused, a reignition of past hurts paused. An understanding dawned on Ciro’s face as he turned back to the game in silence. Felipe stared at him within it, expression unreadable.

He felt Quiet shudder.

(...Concern?) (...Reassurance) Can't die. Not for real. I'd still be there. Paco'll like that.

He'd never seen the threads race to speak over each other before. In the time it took for Paco to straighten in recognition of his own name, Ave already reacted in full.

*(Rejection) No. He would **not**.*

(Elaboration) This is worse. I've told you before. You just keep inventing worse and worse things to brag about being victimized by.

(Correction) Surviving, my jumpy friend. Leave the embellishments to me.

(Frustration) The whole point is that he didn't survive them.

*(Correction) That's the story the way **you** tell it. (Resilience) But 'escaped,' 'survived,' the point is: we're not dead now.*

The Narrator

You are stretched and stretched and stretched, until you are longer than the world itself. You wrap around it again and again and again. A tense line of microcosmic tissue, held together by forces that are far too weak for the task they've been given.

Are you still there? Are you still you?

Voice of the Broken

I'm going to stick around as long as you need me to.

A second of processing. A second of seeing the background disappear in pink and red, of seeing ribbons of tissue curling and curving on themselves without an end in sight.

“No, no, no no nonono,” Ciro said, laughing bitterly. His voice was as dry as it was cold. “That’s complete bullshit.”

Harri tilted his head. “Do you... *not* feel the pain?”

Borja stared at Harri a long moment. Wondering if the question was rhetorical, if Nando had to guess from his pinched, dumbfounded expression.

Thelka, behind him, leveled a harsh stare to the group. A warning, heavy against their backs and shoulders, to let her priest preach, or pay the consequences. The moment held.

Long enough that the reluctant silence of the others, Nando included, emboldened Borja enough to speak his mind. “I feel the pain more than any of you ever had.”

It was a vitriolic statement, said as condemnation of sin. He ground out the syllables from his mouth as if personally disgusted by each, his vocal tone the sound of a boot grinding down on concrete, stomping down on the heretics from on high.

Nando felt his blood boiling, but his mind was sub zero. Gelid enough that something would snap at the slightest change in the air. Cold meant brittle, and brittle meant easy to break.

It was an enclosed room, with no windows open. And yet the winds picked up. And yet the temperature dropped. And yet Borja was so, so exposed, even as he continued to speak.

“it’s what I’m for. I listen to it. All the rest of you... avoid it, fight it, try to tune it out. But those defenses have to come down. And when they inevitably do, when the failure inevitably comes, you might’ve *experienced* that pain... but it’s all too clear that none of you *learned* from it. *I’m* that openness. I help... him see outside himself.”

“*You?* If that’s true then you should’ve been the first to go.” Ciro said from even higher, high on the velocity of his own cyclone. He gestured to the screen. “People *died*.”

“As people do,” Thelka interjected. “It’s a wholly natural process; the weak die out and allow the strong to take their place. And from that act of destruction, a new and better world can be created from the ashes of the old, purified of its blemishes.”

(Foreboding) What are the ‘blemishes’ in this scenario?

People.

(Rage) Fernando and Gonzalo. Us.

“Survival of the fittest,” Beast called, stretching on the couch. “And it seems only one was fit.”

Wind whistled inside the room, between them, around Ciro. “They wouldn’t have died if not for her!”

“As was in her design, little bird,” Thelka said, a demure grin lighting up her face. The winds pushed her hair back in billows and waves around her, spreading out as if it were her halo, as if the winds were hers to command. Her expression was dark. “She’s molded him into what she’s needed, though I admit his will fought valiantly; now, with my priest alone to guide him, he is finally capable of seeing what she needed him to see. Did you forget her purpose in all this? She has a lesson he needs him to help teach.”

“You’re crazy. Insane.”

“I’m *correct*,” Thelka said in a maternal tone, as if reprimanding a child. Her eyes lidded as if endeared by the showing of challenge. “And *this* will be your enlightenment.”

“Now, now, she’s not insane. She believes she’s right!” Connie drawled, the pitch of his voice high and mocking, as he sat up in his seat. He leaned forward, brushing past Quiet and Nando at his side, his hands moving to aid the movement and support his weight as his head dipped in Ciro’s direction. “The word for that is ‘delusional.’”

Borja’s head snapped up. Between the jerked motion and how his eyes had been blown up and the brief parting of his lips, Nando would almost say Borja looked panicked. His gaze flicked to Thelka for a fraction of a second. “You should know your place. Don’t be rude.”

Connie grinned sharply. “Why not? I’m not one of her worshippers. I’m saying my truth. Why is she so threatened? Sounds to me like she knows she’s in the wrong. She’s just hiding it.”

Whatever panic might’ve been melted back to frustration. “You don’t see what’s right in front of you. This was meant to happen all along.”

Tabi buried her face in her hands for a moment and took a deep breath. “What are you talking about?”

The Narrator

And then the forces disappear. The bonds holding your cells together break. You are a thirty-trillion little pieces, all of them separate, and all of them falling.

(Hope) (Fatigue) I’ve heard this one before. Does that mean it’ll be over soon?

(Knowledge) It will be. It’s pointless to continue.

Are you still there? Are you still you?

(Reaction) (Defense) You bet your ass he is.

(Tedium) There’s no need to keep asking.

(Purpose) (Determination) I can remind him.

(Idea) (Hope) Who’s to say we can’t ‘come back’ as we left?

(Identification) Do you hear that tone? I think the chilly one was right. She’s slowing down.

The Narrator

You sit in these thirty-trillion places, each second passing in each of them before you arrive at the next. Each second passing as one million years.

And so you wait.

That's all I have.

The Narrator

And then, all at once, there is a great rewinding, and all of the disparate threads that once were you fall dutifully back into place.

The Narrator

You are whole again, and in your body—the body you had before all of this happened—and the Princess sits against the wall, her dress of skin more tattered than before, her face sullen and disappointed.

You left me. And there's nothing I can do to bring you back.

Voice of the Broken

She's just like us. A piece of her is missing.

Felipe looked like he'd been punched in the gut. His eyes misted over with tears as he took in the sight on the screen, the horrors of the scene hopefully finally clicking in his head with its conclusion. His hands shook, ever so slightly, not with shadows but instead a human fragility. He leaned back, at once at a loss for words, and blinked. Shocked into silence? A single tear rolled down his cheek, and was then followed by a couple more.

“And whose fault is that?” Ciro spat.

“No one's,” Borja paused before continuing to take a dramatic breath. “But—”

“The fuck you mean ‘no one's?!’” Ciro cried, taking advantage of the negative space.

(Intensity) (Focus) Get out of our head. Get out of our head. Get out of our head. Get...

(...Strain)

“She ripped us to fucking shreds and killed off the pieces of us that either couldn't take it or she didn't like!”

“— *But*, ” Borja continued over him. “We still have to take the responsibility to heal the damage and mend the break. No matter the pain it took to get here. No matter the loss. The pieces they're missing are in each other, and once they come together, all of this will be worth it in the end.”

Quiet spasmed.

Nando's ice in his mind cracked. And shattered, all at once.

Gonchi finally spoke up. “Do you think we *want* to be with her—?! ”

“Shut up,” Nando managed. Gonchi whirled around on him, but it didn't matter, he didn't care. He put his hand up in a ‘stop’ gesture, his other comfortably balled into a fist so tight it shook at his side. Gonchi's expression shifted into something like fear. “Shut up, all of you, just shut up. Stop talking. I don't want to hear another word. ‘Oh, I want to be listened to!’”

‘You’re not listening to me!’ ‘Listen,’ ‘listen,’ ‘listen.’ Well, guess what? You’ve all lost speaking privileges. *I’m* talking now.”

His eyes started to burn. His breathing was ragged in a way that made his voice equally as so, danger at its edges, a warning in the tone.

“I don’t get it. I *really* don’t get it. Why shouldn’t I hate her? Why *shouldn’t* I hate her, after she’s killed me, Borja, do you think? Because I hate her. And I don’t really think that’s *my* problem. I think I can choose to hate her if I want, after everything. I don’t think she’s done a single thing but *make me* hate her; I think whatever warmth we might’ve had between us burnt out and died somewhere between the thousands of cells she ripped out of us. And if that warmth, that spark, is the thing that’s missing, it ought to *stay gone*. I don’t think we owe it to her to be the kindling of the forest fire she uses to keep herself warm. Why are we the ones who have to keep forgiving? She hasn’t apologized. I don’t think she’s *going to*. So why are we forgiving? Why *now*, why *immediately*? Who does that benefit? ‘Cause I don’t think it’s *us*. I don’t think it’s even *you!*”

“You didn’t listen to a word I said—”

“What did I just say?” Nando didn’t think those words came from himself. They came from something else, and just happened to be in his voice. Something deeper. Something higher. Something more inherent to him than himself, chips and fractures and textures where lives blended together and parts became whole. It was the sum of his experience distilled into a question that didn’t need an answer, or a response at all, beyond the silence of the still air around him. He was tired, and somehow the tiredness manifested into strength. He watched Borja work for a retort. Didn’t give him the time.

“I would never let go. *I* would never let go. *You—!*” Nando took a breath. It didn’t really help, but it did end the sentence before it started and let him come up with a better one.

“You’re pathetic. If there ever was a worst of us, you were it. Every single time. Everyone knows that. You know that as well as I do. Your ‘oh-so-perfect’ ‘goddess’ knows that, too, it’s what she liked from you. How easily your will broke. How she could use you to do her bidding without actually having to so much as raise a finger. *You’re* the one who cowers to hurt, *you’re* the one who *lets* us get hurt, and *you’re* the reason she was *able* to hurt us. You killed me. And if you have your way you’re going to kill Quiet, too.”

“I’m as much of a part of him as you are.”

“You broke off so he could discard you,” Nando hissed. “You didn’t hatch. Isn’t that your point of pride? That *she* broke you off from us, that *she* named you? Well then. Guess that answers that question, doesn’t it? You aren’t one of us. You’re just one of *hers*. Just as bad for us, too. And I’m done tolerating you.”

He intended to stop, there. He intended for that to be the end of discussion. He intended to settle down. He didn’t expect himself to rise, to stand in the middle of the room, and to keep going. He didn’t expect that the words would be so hard to stop once they started flowing.

He didn’t realize just how much he’d been holding back.

“From the first instant we met in the woods you were a problem. Even at your best you were a nuisance, and at your worst you’ve become an active threat—not even exercising your own will, either. Because then I’d at least respect you enough to be afraid. But you’re *infuriating*. Your every word sucks the energy from the people around you, your every breath is an insult to the injury of your creation. You dared to stab us and then pretended you had moral superiority for it? You told us our efforts were in vain and now you tell us, after we’ve succeeded, that our failure is futile. To what end? When will it finally click how *hopeless* this belief system is, Borja? When will you understand just how much *worse* everything gets when *you* decide to become a part of it? You have *never* helped with *anything*. ”

Fernando turned away at once, finished, craning his neck to take a good look at the screen. The Princess looked hollowed out. Emotionally, that is. Physically, not a single scar was left behind. *Good. Let her stay that way. That’s not even half of what she put us through.*

He tried to imagine Quiet rewound after this. The burden of all five of their senses functioning all at once again after untold years lost blind and deaf and hurting in the dark, the weight of their body after spending so long in pieces, the horror of their now intimate knowledge of how all the pieces fit and link and work together. All the ways those pieces could be arranged. All the way those pieces could fail. A whisper in their ear telling them how sad their torturer across the room was, now.

All of that...

...just because they wanted to *leave*.

- (Explore) "I'm not gone. I'm right here."
- (Explore) "I never stopped caring about you. But you have to let go of all of that pain."
- (Explore) "There's more to life than violence and pain. We can be more than that, if you want."
- (Explore) "What were you hoping to accomplish with all of that?"
- (Explore) "You seem so... off. It's like you're a completely different person than you were when you started pulling me apart."
- (Explore) "That was awful. I hated every second of it."
- (Explore) "So that's all you've got, huh?"
- "I think I'm going to go now."
- "I'm going to leave now. I was hoping you'd come with me."
- [Turn and leave.]
- [Slay the Princess.]

All that, and there were still options to turn the other cheek. Way past the point it was healthy or sane.

(Respect)

“Quiet deserves better than you. That’s *all* that matters,” he said. He ached. His eyes burned, hotter than anything he’d ever known. He’d be surprised if he didn’t shed a few tears, all things considered. His voice scratched on his sore throat. He was *tired*. Ciro was staring at him. He was taking too long. What was he waiting for? “Let him *out*. ”

Unexpectedly, Ciro smiled. “Felt good, huh?”

...He *did* feel a lot more relaxed. Relaxed enough to collapse, at least, if he let himself. This was not the place or time to let himself. He carefully sat back in place beside Quiet, trying not to jostle them or lean into.. into the couch too far. He needed a nap.

“If you don’t leave,” Ava spoke up, “I’ll be very mad at you.”

Felipe nearly choked. “What?”

“She wants a reaction. Don’t give her one,” Connie advised.

Ciro huffed, brows knit together in offense. “Wasn’t planning to.”

- [Turn and leave.]

The Narrator

You turn back towards the stairs, putting the Princess forever out of your mind.

... Alone.

Voice of the Broken

Maybe going our separate ways is the only way things can ever get better. At least this can be over.

“That’s that, then,” Cain commented. “Onto the next thing.”

Nando stared at the screen. That was *Borja*? He glanced to see Borja with a similar expression he imagined as his own, unable to match the quiet acceptance to the delusional cultist zealot sitting in the same room as him.

Felipe was fidgeting beside him, uncomfortable. “After all that? We just...?”

Borja shook his head, equally as bemused.

“Yes,” Cain said. “We ‘just.’ It’s that simple.”

The Narrator

Over? You do know that this really doesn't solve anything, right?

Voice of the Broken

It doesn't have to solve anything.

The Narrator

But this isn't over! She'll find a way out! If you don't turn around and finish this right now, she'll bring about the end of the entire—

Voice of the Broken

And He's gone, too. It's just you and me now.

The memory shifts.

Voice of the Cold

And He's gone, too. It's just you and me now.

Nando blinked out the remnants of the memory.

The memory that wasn't accompanied by any disorientation on his part at all. The memory he had no connection to. The memory he watched as if through someone else's eyes, feeling a distinct sense of *nothing* through their being with nothing to accompany it beyond the *lack* and the *emptiness*, but nothing of him; nothing of his own. Because he wasn't there.

He was always supposed to be there. He was the First and was supposed to be the Last, too.

The role was filled. His place was taken. Too tired, too lost, too dead to mourn, so it was almost like he'd never been there at all. Almost like they'd never been okay or alive in the first place, if the memory itself ran foreign to them now, a stranger to himself.

It could have almost been the same they just saw on the screen. Except the differences, as subtle as they were at a first glance, were glaring. Borja regarded the Narrator's passing with the slightest hint of regret and regard; Cain's tone fell at the end in clear disregard, even contempt. But it was more than that. Borja was tired, voice raspy with the exhaustion of an eternity experienced and well-felt; Cain was his typical monotone, as if it'd all ran right past him and left him wholly unaffected. But that wasn't quite right. There was almost a higher energy in his voice, a way he pushed out the words "you" and "me" like they carried more meaning than they typically did; a... *smile*, almost, in his tone at the thought.

"There's nothing worse than being alone!" Felipe cried, aghast.

"Did... did you not see or hear *anything* in the past hour or so?"

"Of course I did, I'm not blind."

As you climb to the top of the stairs, you realize that there is no top of the stairs to reach. At least not anymore.

Her voice quietly whispers from behind you.

I feel so cold. Is it because you're gone?

But as you look over your shoulder, you do not find her, nor will you ever. It's time to leave. Memory returns.

Ciro almost hunched his shoulders. Nando didn't need the threads to detect the bone-deep exhausting he was surely feeling. It was finally over. And in just a little while, they would be

able to leave, too.

He wasn't naive enough to think they would be leaving 'for good', not yet, not before the whole nightmare was over, but they needed a moment to rest.

(Placation) We can better negotiate after tonight. There'll be more mutual respect on both sides. We have to build up their trust to take advantage of it later.

(Resolve) I'm helping you this time.

It was... a very strange feeling, someone *laughing* in the threads.

*(Laughter) I don't think 'mutual respect' is what I'd call it after everything Nando said, mierda. (Hope) Quiet **better** have seen that.*

(Mischief) He's giving you a run for your money, you might need to rebrand.

Voice of the Broken

So the world's gone, and she's gone with it. There's only one thing left for you to do here. You need to look at yourself. Whatever you see, it's going to be okay.

Quiet stirred. Nando watched him glance up to watch the screen, to genuinely watch the screen.

- [Approach the mirror.]

The voice falls silent as you approach.

- [Gaze into your reflection.]

Nando felt a pang in his chest. 'You've unraveled', the mirror said, and... of course. Of course Quiet would be left mangled, of course the Fury wouldn't put him back together properly, there had been a lot more meat in that basement than at the start.

No muscle left, bones jutting out too sharply to be even close to natural. Ruffled, unhealthy-looking feathers. Where would that end? Could he be healed? If they went through something nice for a change, would it get better?

(Worry) Good thing Damiana got out when she did, this was...

Nando could feel Connie itching to comment on that as Ciro went through the motions of going back to The Long Quiet, the place (and why was that place named like his friend?) and meeting her once more.

(Reminiscence) And of course, there's the music.

There's a world beyond the endless walls of The Long Quiet. We're supposed to be there. Do you know what we'll find out there?

Nando hadn't had time to think about the fact he'd have to hear her again. The dream mimicked her almost-perfectly. She sounded... softer, than he remembered her typical inflections. More curious than calculative, more honest than hostile, melodic rather than manipulative.

(Warning) The lovesickness is watching. Hold your tongue.

(Confusion) (Defense) I wasn't about to say anything.

(Explanation) Your heartrate increased. You're mad, even if you don't know it yet.

(Mockery) And so, Fernando never learned how to turn OFF the rage button, and forevermore would scream and shout at everything to ever inconvenience him.

(Payback) (Defense) First off, Ave is mad too. His ears are pointing diagonally. Second off, it wasn't that bad.

(Disbelief)

- (Explore) "Is that a rhetorical question? Do you know? Do you want to tell me?"
- (Explore) "There's trees, and stars. And there are people, I think. At least there are supposed to be people."
- (Explore) "Do you think that anything is real out there? Do you think that we're real?"
- (Explore) "Do you have thoughts on this vessel?"
- (Explore) "Do you know what's going to happen when you awaken?"
- (Explore) "When you send me back, I'm not alone. There are voices that speak to me. Some of them are me, but one of them is something else. I call him The Narrator, and he wants me to kill you. Do you have a Narrator? Have the vessels had one?"
- (Explore) "How many more vessels do I need to bring you?"
- "I'm ready to go back."
- [Destroy your body.]

"Sharp catch, Quiet," Harri said as he caught the first option of the list. "She is rhetorical, we've seen as much from our prior meetings."

"Rhetoric is just the inherent nature of using words," Tabi agreed. "When you say anything, you're following a rhetoric. And She's had ideas we couldn't have considered yet, that was how our whole first meeting went."

(Boredom) (...Realization) Look at that one, he can think of us while he's there!

Connie's realization and reaction came faster through the mental link than his actual physical body. In a wave of excitement, he pointed to the screen, at the option discussing the Narrator. And... "Ah— that's *us* he's talking about!"

A sentence, a passing thought only in elaboration of a different point, but it was *something*. There was a sort of pride in the understanding that Nando was the reason Quiet could say he wasn't alone whenever he was sent back. There was a sort of horror in the comprehension that Quiet *could've* been alone, had their latest route taken a different turn.

“Aw, he’s ‘not alone’ as long as he has us, how sweet!” Connie said, apparently taking the pride and holding off on the horror. *How*, Nando didn’t know.. “Saying we ‘are’ him is a *weird* way to put it, though.”

“It’s more of an ‘us’ situation, hasn’t it been? But it’s hard to phrase when there is no ‘us’ to reference.”

“Weird seeing him assert... authority, like that,” Oli nearly trailed off, voice barely audible near the end of the statement.

“You know what, actually, I like to think the Narrator is a sort of part of us,” Connie said, presumably just to get yelled at by the rest of them.

It might have been a testament of what two months of uninterrupted existence did to everyone, that none of them rose to the bait. Rolled their eyes in silence, maybe. *Ciro* didn’t respond at all, focusing more on Harri and Tabi’s suggestion.

Rhetorical. I am not rhetorical. I have only known these spaces, and I have known flickers of the lives you’ve brought me. Short and violent and full of passion. But all of those flickers end where *The Long Quiet* begins.

I’m asking you because I cannot know your mind. Do you know what we’ll find out there?

(Startle) Okay, okay, sorry!

Ah, *that* fell in line more with Nando’s expectations. He couldn’t say the sudden increase in volume for the first line was appreciated, though, nor was her not-quite-successful attempt to smoothly return to her softer speaking voice after she finished laying into *Quiet* for asking a question.

[Skepticism] (Anger) So that was how it started.

“There’s stars, but never a sun...” Tabi was frowning.

- (Explore) "There's trees, and stars. And there are people, I think. At least there are supposed to be people."

There is a warmth and sadness in me at the thought of people. Fresh tears on a winter's day. They are not like us. They do not last.

(Relief) She cares.

There was something of a startling, jumping sensation through the threads as Oli, unmistakable now that Nando knew him better, rushed to block Borja back out.

“Don’t presume to know he’s the same as you.”

“How does she know she’ll ‘last’?”

“What scale does She see us in?” Tabi wondered. “Are we really as fleeting as *tears* to Her?”

“What scale do *you* see *Her* in?” Plethora asked, blinking encouragingly but asynchopated.

“Not even gods last forever.”

Plethora barely shifted their head. Their rightmost face was glancing in Thelka’s direction. “We haven’t considered the thought of an end to her before. Is it possible? She feels... omnipresent, doesn’t she?”

“Hell no she doesn’t,” Ava disagreed. Unlike most of the other girls Nando had seen up to this point, she didn’t seem affected at all by the sight of the Fury in her many arms. But who would? “You just need to focus on who you *were* and *are* outside of what she tried to force you to be. That’s all. Ground yourself in what’s real! Punch something!”

(Shame) ...They don't have much to go off of.

(Encouragement) Hey, chin up, mate. Still not anyone's fault.

“Easier said than done. But we’ll keep it in mind.”

- (Explore) "Do you think that anything is real out there? Do you think that we're real?"

We are real. 'Nothing' is an idea that dwells in the absence of 'something.' But 'nothing' cannot exist on its own. And because of that, 'nothing' can't exist.

“Please don’t start being all metaphorical!” Connie practically begged. “That’s a whole lot of ‘nothing’ to me!”

Harri’s lips twitched. “So it *can* exist.” Connie paused, then groaned louder. Harri snickered at him. “You can’t escape it, Connie, you will have an opinion.”

“Nothing is real,” Cain said. And didn’t elaborate on. Nando assumed it had something to do with his constant claims he was ‘feeling nothing,’ and promptly disregarded it. He wasn’t in the mood to argue with Cain right now. He doubted anyone was.

“I’m tired of her bullshit.” Ciro announced.

- "I'm ready to go back."

The next time I see you, each of us will finally know what we are.

I will be here. Waiting for you.

Everything goes dark, and you die.

“We only have one more. Then that’s it.” Tabi said almost to herself.

Ciro sprang out of his seat at the same time the sound of shattering glass played. He held himself with a certain tension. “Where’s the bathroom?”

That was a strange final comment, but with how exhausted Nando felt, he could relate only having the brainpower to devote to the basic needs only. He was looking forward to a nap in his own house, his own room, his own bed.

If looks could kill, Paco's glare would have sent Ciro to a coffin. He didn't think they could afford to fight right then. There was something delicate in the atmosphere of the house. Easy to shatter.

(Notice) I'll be back. (Conspiracy) Need to get Dami out. Harri, tell Tabi.

[Calculation] (Conspiracy) And if Felipe tries to come with?

(Distraction) (Ire) I said he's getting kicked out. I make good on my threats.

Nando tapped Quiet's shoulder. He shivered a bit from the contact, mist drawing out from their skin and trailing in the path his hand took through the air. "Hey, you with me now?"

The slightest little nod and eye contact from tired, tired eyes.

"We're getting ready to leave. Time to go back home."

They blinked, bleary but understanding, just a little more energized at the promise of escape.

"Sounds like a place we want to be, killer," Grace agreed, her voice light and accommodating—with an odd enunciation, as if waking from sleep, clinging to a dream. She felt closer to Nando, as if pushing up on the border between him and Quiet, swaddled between them both. The cold was nice. "How long until we get up and going?"

"Uh," Nando started, tuning into the rest...

[Opportunism] (Doubt) You do realize you're burning that bridge to cinders?

[Righteousness] (Curiosity) Have you been locking his 'door' like Borja's?

(Dread) ...There's nothing to close off from.

(Anger) Yeah, 'cause he's not interested in listening. Just like Quiet said he wasn't interested in talking. He's burnt the bridge himself.

(Caution) Wait wait wait, hold on a second there. We'll be making a permanent enemy of him if he's stuck with Borja.

[Calculation] (Astonishment) He could have killed you and you still want him on our side? Sometimes trusting isn't the right thing to do.

*(Doubt) (Distrust) (Irony) Trust me, I'm the **last** person you need to tell that. [Opportunism] It's kinda my thing.*

(Explanation) It's a matter of distrust; we can't see what he's up to when we turn our back on him. You ever hear the phrase 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer?'

[Righteousness] (Disbelief) So we invite the enemy into our house?

[Opportunism] (Sage) We've worn him down. If there's any time to appeal to his better nature, it's when he's too emotionally exhausted to fight back.

[Paranoia] (Trepidation) And when he recovers enough energy to kill us in our sleep?

...this conversation would run in circles forever if he let it, he was realizing. Every time it seemed like they were coming to a stop, a new detail was presented for debate. Worse yet, he was starting to get invested in the argument.

It seemed Quiet and Grace were, too, judging by how their head had tilted to the side as if listening to the voices bounce about in their head. They stared at him, but he knew them well enough— possessed or not— to know they were just staring into open space.

Right, he had to cut that out or they'd attract attention. At least this was more urgent than some of the pointless things they ended up arguing about back at home.

[Opportunism] (Disregard) It won't be in our sleep, he's too flashy for that.

[Calculation] (Reminder) And Dami...?

(Surprise) (Consideration) Well—

(Exhaustion) Even if we somehow managed to sort this whole deal out, Felipe's just too emotionally unstable to live with. I'm not looking forward to walking on eggshells every day in case he gets set off.

[Righteousness] (Satisfaction) Kicking him out it is, then!

[Opportunism] (Compromise) Don't be spiteful about it. Let him keep an open mind. (Worry) He'll want to visit if just to see Dami. (Idea) (...Reluctance) Maybe she could talk to him for us?

(Rejection) Hell no.

(Realization) Yeah, yeah, bad idea. You're right.

(Exasperation) Can we start planning for the future when we're back home?

(Apology) I'm going.

The way out, despite the deliberations, was leagues easier than what they'd overthought it to be. No drinks needed to be poisoned, and the discussion of Felipe's to-be living situation, while tense as Harri worried, did not escalate to anything beyond passive-aggressive looks and comments on account of the exhaustion Oli predicted. Harri's mind continued to whirr on the topic, tangibly felt through the threads' vibrations, unsatisfied with a half-baked plan.

Borja's heart was left still beating, too. In all likelihood, Ciro's passivity on the way out must have been a combined effort of Paco and Ave at his sides.

Quiet, luckily, did not need further prompting or sobering in order to rise and follow the crowd out the door. Plethora held it open for him, acting as a barrier between the escaping parties and those remaining with the host, and nodded, all smiles, as he passed them on the way out. A hand might've raised to pat them encouragingly on the shoulder. They were pulled out before it connected.

All that to say: teletransporting while in someone else's body was an awful experience.

Ciro seemed to have a similar experience, though probably not for the same reasons. "Paco, I know, I know, *'so we aren't followed,'* but please shut up, I need to go collapse somewhere."

The door opened to Dami, as expected, already safe inside. Looking as comfortable there as if she'd been living there all her life.

The plate of puffed pastries on the countertop was less expected. The room smelt like sugar. The oven... was oddly clean, considering the spontaneous baked goods, almost as if it'd gone untouched. God, but she was *hungry*. Or maybe, probably, Quiet was the one whose stomach was tying knots with its hunger cues, finally able to listen to his body now that the danger had passed.

"Ave didn't leave enough for you guys, so I had to improvise," Dami smiled nervously. She glanced between everyone and lit up when she saw Paco glaring at the pastries like they were concealing razorblades. "Oh! Don't worry! I can do a taste test for one, myself, so you'll know for sure they aren't poisoned!"

Ava grinned weakly before going for the door, presumably to the bedroom area. "You all start without me. I... I need to think."

Harri startled. "You need to *what?*"

Gonchi was already hot on her heels. "Wait—!"

The door was left ajar behind her retreating form; Gonchi chased after her, slamming it behind him. In the meantime, Paco had approached the kitchen and started critically examining the pastries. Oli offered to taste-test for Dami himself, saying something about how experienced he was with poisons and how Paco could *definitely* trust his judgement, super-duper promise. It worked, not because he was convincing, but because Paco didn't want to deal with him. He said they tasted "amazing," and that was all the rest of them needed to start swarming the kitchen like ants.

"Connie told me you know how to bake cookies?" Dami was telling Paco. "Can you teach me?"

Paco stared at her like he could detect falsehoods from the eyes alone. "If you're not one of those imbeciles who measure with the heart."

“...why else would there be a recipe if not for following it?”

Dami wanted to look like nothing had happened, Grace could tell, but her eyes were still overbright. Right, Gonchi's thread had kept her tethered, too. Grief wasn't something Grace would wish on anyone. Neither was Thelka's sheer weighted presence.

They would need to talk about what happened, but not right away. Now was the time to relax.

Dami intentionally approached Quiet with a glass of water, setting in next to him on the table, and turned back to the others without pressure or expectation. Quiet glanced at it, ruminating over it with slight confusion (*'I didn't ask for this?' 'But she thought you might want it, killer'*), before picking it up and taking a sip.

Grace was struck by the fact that she'd never actually *felt* water going down her throat before. It was cold, refreshingly so in a way that spread throughout the body. It suddenly made more sense why the others sometimes drank water to calm down.

Connie had seated next to Winnie. Probably from the fact she was still taking half his scarf hostage. Grace had no experience with sick people, but she... wasn't looking too good.

Now that the group had loosened up, the threads around Quiet's soul unspooled on their own; many didn't pull away entirely, a certain sense of (*purpose*) thrumming through them, a certain compassion and care for their shared companion magnetized them together. They floated in orbit around him. They just weren't bearing down on her with so much pressure.

Nando, well, his hold compared to the others' seemed to not change at all. Still looping around, still resting against her, still gentle and warm like his eyes. She knew it to have loosened only by the fact that she could move freely again. He was remarkably close. But remarkable, too, was how readily his thread's bind around Quiet accommodated her, shifting unconsciously in her presence to let her in or out as she pleased. He'd gotten used to her, she supposed.

Grace, admittedly, was reluctant to pop out just yet. It was comfortable. A lot better than their first try at possession had gone. Less life-threatening, more comforting.

But she knew for a fact Fernando was tired, and she could feel Quiet beginning to settle down. She'd come in to help with the storm approaching on the screen, for the chill of her dead skin to bring respite from the heat of the fire. The storm was over. They didn't need her like this anymore.

And, well, ghosts didn't need to sleep. Grace didn't have so much as the memory of sleep to draw comparisons from. Her death didn't count; it was more of a forced paralysis or a housefire. And she didn't want to try co-sleeping now when it was more than obvious Quiet was dead on his feet even without her input.

No matter how much he reassured her that it was fine.

So, out she went. The steady warmth that had kept her almost drowsy was replaced by an unremarkable temperature. Or maybe it was that ghosts couldn't feel it normally? She'd felt cold, at first, before she'd possessed Quiet the first time; but it was like, ever since, the chill of death had ceased to brush against her.

That was her killer, defying logic in all kinds of ways.

She didn't realize something was wrong at first. Tabi froze, her pastry about to touch her lips, while Dami's eyes practically sparked.

"What?"

"I love your hair," Dami blurted out. Grace wondered, for a moment, if she needed glasses after all. The one substantive one could give her hair was 'dead', and not just because it was attached to a ghost. Others could be 'limp' and 'lifeless', like string. It was frayed, fragile-looking, and as brittle as the bones that littered her cabin's floor. A reflection of the eternity she spent rotting in a body she never lived within.

Just to humor her, she reached for it. She realized something was wrong as soon as her hand brushed a strand, texture *different*, so she twisted to see.

It was dark. That wasn't normal, her hair was as light and as wispy as her body, except not anymore. It had substance; it had volume, so full of it she'd even describe it as 'thick.' It curled with a renewed vitality, no longer limp, bound nevermore to the whims of the wind and the motions of the tides. She brushed her hand through it, coarse and real against her fingers.

She'd never had her hair like that since...

The puzzle pieces clicked. Grace experimented.

She wasn't possessing Quiet anymore, but if she just pretended to be, if she thought of them and held onto a subtle sense of weight and warmth in her chest where a deep, dark hole used to be...

(Flattery) (Contentment) Aw, killer, you shouldn't have.

(Startle) 'Shouldn't have' what? What did you do?

It was funny how different it felt, talking through an extension of someone else's soul. A thread, *Grace's* thread, ran from the scar over her heart to the scar over Quiet's she knew to be there; as she watched, she saw a pale-pretty light pink weave within and between the dark. It was disconnected compared to outright speaking from within them, her very being overlapping with theirs; and yet, speaking to them like this, she felt far closer.

Thirteen is a lucky number after all.

dua: Never let us cook, or we will give you a 75-dishes-dinner next time. God, this really got away from us! To more long chapters!

overthinkit: this is a long chapter; you can almost call it a marathon. two fun facts for you! for one: marathon runners tend to eat a lot of carb-loaded food, both before and after a race, to energize and replenish and reward their body for going the distance. and for two: did you know a fic author's diet tends to consist of 80% comments? (and a little salami.)

dua: :(pass on the salami. more for you though!

Spanish phrases

'Vos sos o te haces?': lit. 'are you, or are you pretending?' a way to ask if someone actually is that stupid or they're for whatever reason pretending to be

Chapter 18: Cuando sea grande

Chapter Summary

They have been unwound. They must now unwind. So used to running in cycles until patterns break; now, to fall into step. Chill disperses with secrets unfolding in gardens beneath the skin. Waiting for something new to happen...

Chapter Notes

A few days ago it was Petrified's birthday, and we got gifts!

[An amazing little comic mixing up Petrified and Watership Down, by PureAsSalt](#)

Was told the names were confusing if they were at the end so here they are, at the beginning!

Broken - Borja

Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi

Cold - Caín

Contrarian - Connie

Hunted - Avellano/Ave

Opportunist - Oleander/Oli

Paranoid - Paco

Cheated - Ciro

Hero - Fernando/Nando

Smitten - Felipe

Skeptic - Harrier/Harri

Prisoner - Tabi/Tabitha

Damsel - Dami/Damiana

Witch - Winnie/Winifred

Tower - Thelka

Adversary - Ava

Nightmare - Clara

Spectre - Grace

Stranger - Plethora

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Gonchi could not hear past the blood rushing in his ears, but that was fine, words weren't his forte anyway. And they weren't Ava's. And there was nothing wrong with that, so why waste time and energy devoted to thinking in words when they could get to the root of things faster by acting in blood? Shed or lusted after, either was fine by him.

He wouldn't let Ava deal with this on her own; he'd be damned if the thing that did her in was a *thought*. He shut the door behind him with such force he'd be surprised if its hinges didn't rattle. He wasn't having interruptions, either.

It was too much to put into words. Quiet was the one who could write the poetry of he and Ava's clashes into words instead of blood. Their words were beautiful and spoken in whispers like a cooling breeze on a hot and humid evening. His words were bloodstained and stung on his hands like skin split by fresh impacts, bleeding like sweat. Practiced, versus clumsy. Natural, versus secondary. Inborn, versus trained.

Being with Ava felt natural, easy, right. He never thought anything would have shaken that belief. It was something fundamental in its truth.

But what he had seen...

Who he had seen on the screen was not her, that was obvious. No matter the origin point. It looked nothing like her, did not do things the way she did, and the fact that game had wormed its way into her head was infuriating.

Gonchi sped up to her like a heat-seeking missile.

He couldn't be like Quiet. But he could be like himself. And a lesson on the 'self' was just what the both of them could use, in their *first* language. Such thought was all the propulsion he needed, the rest from his feet, the momentum of it carrying in his body weight. Without hesitation, he lunged forward.

Ava sidestepped him. It was an admirable dodge, but not one he sought to honor. His feet hit the ground hard, the impact running through his legs harder as he pushed through it. He did not rebound artfully, because he did not run like Ave did, but he did manage a harsh jerk of a turn to spin his whole body to face Ava's direction.

Grit teeth and spread arms were all Gonchi saw before she retaliated. She was ready for him.

Strong, impenetrable arms wrapped around his upper torso and pulled him up and in, raising him off the ground—and *halted*. Momentum canceled, neither raising him higher or preparing to push or throw. And then her arms pressed in, crushing him to her chest.

It was not an attack or a strong blow, but the wind was knocked out of him regardless. He had the stray thought that the few centimeters she had on him was unfair—he couldn't put his feet on the ground and break free that way. He broke his arms free from where she'd captured them at his sides and wrapped them around her broad shoulders and neck, creating leverage to push himself up and over her.

He didn't manage to free himself, though. In response to his movement, Ava's arms had pressed him to herself tighter, pressed so flush against him he could feel the pulse in her arms. Quick, fast, full of a life they were meant to embrace together. She pushed him; he pushed back, hanging onto her for that dear life.

Embracing each other because they chose, so long ago, to embrace life; to enjoy their living. Their heartbeats matched and echoed between each other, like call and response, song and refrain. Who needed words when *this* was an option?

A noise, guttural and choking, erupted out from Ava's throat; a sound like a blood rattle. A sound like sobbing.

Dyssynchrony. At that moment, the urge to move that Gonchi was honored by and adhered to vanished; scattering into a diluted repression in the muscle fibers binding them together. The movement between them stilled, spark sputtering in the grip of inertia. That was the whole issue, their one boundary.

She wasn't looking for a fight, so he wouldn't give her one.

She'd do the same. He *knew* that much. Whatever twisted version he had seen on that screen did not change what reality was. Why couldn't she see that? He held her tight, patted her down, rubbed her neck and back with what little range of motion he could afford stuck in this pose. Equally as harsh as he was gentle, seeking a response beyond the continuous sobbing that kept increasing in volume as she gradually stopped holding herself back.

Her tail was hanging too low for him to reach, anyway. And he was pretty sure that wouldn't be appreciated.

Ava ducked her head so it was resting on his. He fought the compulsive need to start kicking his legs, he couldn't even reach his thigh that way. He had to move something. He hooked his legs around Ava, stabilizing himself on her body like one would when climbing a pole. The one on the screen had stopped being Ava the moment she did something she would never do, it was that simple.

They even had the chapter transition to prove it.

She just had to let everything out, purge herself of whatever thoughts that game gave her. They didn't belong in her head.

A change in breathing and in pressure, eventually.

"Quiet doesn't know I don't mean any of it," Ava said, and he could feel the way she wrung her hands on his back. He pressed his palms against the back of her neck and squeezed.

"He gave her a different name. He knows the split between her and you," he told her. He hoped the pressure against her neck told her she was forgiven regardless; he hoped the pressure told her the bad feelings were vented somewhere between the fiftieth and five-hundredth split skull and shattered spine between them. Quiet wasn't into bloodshed for its own sake, but he was still into her; she was so much more than just that, and if anything, Fury only proved it.

Ava's hands settled around his neck in turn. A silent question to turn it around on himself; the split between him and 'Stubborn,' where was it? Not-her, did she kill him, or not-him?

He bumped his head against hers. A light tap. A brief sting. 'Gonzalo' was the only one who she could feel right now. He huffed a breath, hot air sticking to her face. Told her 'who she was' was stuck in the now, that pictures on screens didn't breathe like they did. "You've meant everything you've ever said."

He only had to get her to stop thinking about it, the only way he knew how. He was already running warm. And, contrary to what he had expected, he did have some wiggle room. A shift in tension to be vented; one way or another, exertion did wonders in dispelling unwanted energy.

He pushed himself up just enough to brush their faces together, his lips lingering by her ear. "Now, I want to hear you tell me 'yes.'"

Gonchi brought one hand away from her neck to grab Ava's chin, pulling it down slightly as he shimmied further up her body, and she responded in tune by supporting his middle half with one arm as the other remained around his neck.

As she didn't look repulsed and his face was still intact, Gonchi leaned in, his kiss gentle to allow her to withdraw if she wanted to.

She did not. Ava reciprocated by bashing her warm yet chapped lips firmly against his and his forehead, harsh as always but with a fervent edge he was beginning to recognize.

Her free hand clawed up to his hair—leaving stinging cuts in its wake up his neck — roughly tangling her fingers within his hair as her breath quickened. Her tail wrapped around his hip as she pressed him further against her calescent skin. Two becoming one.

As a familiar rush of heat and love coursed through him, he couldn't help the smile that spread on his smarting lips. Now that was more of the Ava he knew, nowhere close to the one that had been shown in a bad light on the screen.

'We need to talk,' he'd said. Here she was, ready to talk, and what did he say, what did he say to her?

"I don't want to see you," Ciro muttered dispassionately, retreating to his and Harri's room and shutting the door behind him without another word.

Well, Winnie thought, resisting the urge to wallop the door. Just what she had to expect! If he thought her a wretch for what she'd done, then she was just one among many. That! Was! All!

What did he say, back in that nasty home-disguised cabin? Something about how wicked she was with a single ounce of control. Asked if it felt good to dish out the same bullshit they'd both been dealt.

"Well it did!" She said. "It did, and I'd do it again." Because if someone had to do it, she'd rather it be her, and she'd rather it be without pretenses. If she had to be either a villain or a

victim, she'd choose to be vile, she knew it to be true. She knew she wanted to be hated. So! It! Didn't! Matter!

It didn't matter, how quickly things had spiraled out of control after. It didn't matter that Ciro'd been the one to deal with the worst of her mess. Because if it was him, it *wasn't* her, was it now? That was what mattered, wasn't it?

She turned tail from the door, huffing, and did not care one bit. She was better off alone, anyway!

[Crawl into my mouth, said the Leopard to the Bird, so that I may keep you close.]

Quiet was still in his room, watching the light that could pass through the space between the blinds get brighter and brighter. He could hear, faintly, noises. His people waking up. Talking.

['Crawl into my mouth?' cried the Rabbit to the Bird, that will kill you!]

[Where else can I go? said the Bird to the Rabbit.]

The town they were in had a faded, timeless beauty to it. Like birds swooping down to take out crumbs of food. They would keep doing that till the end of time, slow to change. There were streets with no greenery that made walking out in the sun an actual task and other streets that had tall trees whose leaves coated the asphalt and rendered windows useless.

He wanted to go out there. He wanted to go out there. He wanted to go out there. He wanted. He wanted. He wanted. He wanted—

[Away, answered the Rabbit. To open skies to fly.]

He didn't move. He had grown roots throughout the night and was pinned to the bed. Something was choking him. Explosions under his skin made his limbs lock up.

[My wings are cut, said the Bird to the Rabbit. I am tired and injured.]

He wanted to scrub his skin raw. His body ached in a way that shouldn't be *nostalgic* but he had no other words to compare it to. Memories rushed in his head, with such force it was like they wanted to expose themselves, erode him like a pebble. They collided against each other and fizzled out like flickering embers, leaving naught but dust and scattered atoms behind, naught but the memory of an impact. A clue, the tension of his unmoving flinches, the knowledge that *something happened there*. That *something* was destroyed, or changed, or defiled—but not what.

[Still, still! cried the Rabbit to the Bird. The Leopard's claws cut them still, and its fangs are all the sharper.]

Never what. Just that it was Before and would become Now, and Before was so varied yet similar, and Now would blur into a cacophony of everything Before and nothing Then.

Not even a crater remained, vacuum erased as soon as it was created. And yet his mind kept moving, overpowering, racing, lost in the effort of going through the motions and losing out on the kinetics; and his body remained locked solidly in place. Trapped under the weight of burning memories he wouldn't— couldn't recall.

He wanted to scream.

[Without wings, the Bird asked the Rabbit, what may I ever do?]

He had been sleeping under the bed, sometimes. Since he started looking back. It was childish, he knew that. It wasn't like he could ever do anything to stop Her, anyway.

Dread filled him all the same, every time he went to sleep.

[You have legs, said the Rabbit. You must run.]

They knew, distantly, that Nando wanted to ask what was wrong. How to help. How could they ask even more of him? After what he had seen, after what She had done to him? After what they had let happen?

They didn't want him to look at them differently, so they said nothing. It was all in his head. Everyone must be getting tired of walking on eggshells around him. He couldn't be so pathetic forever.

A tug on some of his threads. He wished he could figure out what he was feeling. Some flavor of *[Unworthy]*, perhaps.

[Run, says the Rabbit]

He glared at the door with a certain intensity. It made his stomach roll and his throat tighten. He fixated himself on the topic anyway, with so little else to do with an uncooperative body, with so much time to kill before it opened.

The door was right there. It was not locked. He wasn't very good at hiding.

He could go out of the door. Nothing would happen to him.

A fuzzy, thick feeling like fur on his shoulder blades, under the knots of his neck. The urge to bite and snap and lunge. It wasn't his. It came from one of his threads, the ones that held all the color in the world. It was an answer, something like a defense.

There was fighting. There was always fighting.

That was new. That was—

(Terror)

His, for once.

[RUN, says the Rabbit]

There was a knock on the door.

He recognized that voice. The door was unlocked, Nando *knew* that. Why wasn't he entering?

Terror blocked the air in his chest and a sob bubbled in his throat.

[*RUN, HOWLS THE RABBIT*]

Quiet didn't see the door open.

It had to have, though, because Nando was standing at the side of the bed and Quiet's throat felt significantly more strained as if he'd tried and failed to choke back a cry. Another scattering of atoms, lost to the ether, a bit of him lost with it he was sure; it was in his nature to lose. That didn't mean he wanted to.

Nando was farther away, just a few steps back. When were those steps taken, why was he going, why did he come in at all? Quiet was trembling— right, they couldn't do that, they couldn't do that, they couldn't stop— he opened his mouth to apologize but the noise that ripped out of him was not words, but all he'd repressed, an inhuman and ugly sound that could've been called any number of things. It was choked back but didn't know why. Because it didn't deserve to be heard, because it was vile and pathetic and undignified. Because it needed to be reshaped. Because it didn't know what it was anymore.

Nando held his hands up in front of his face as if placating a wild animal. Was it? Was it a wild animal? Was it a body? Could it even grasp the fuzziest edges that defined it? It didn't want to be anything. It had to be nothing. It had no body; it was take— it rotted away before it was bor— before it was conceptualized. No, it was nothing. Movement Itself, it flinched back from, a tide of hands descending upon them— *it*—

A hand. Wiping away the wetness of its cheek.

Gentle but fleeting, fleeting in a way its usual changes never were. It was used to touches that lingered the way burns did, deeper than the skin. This touch was not an awful gentleness that refused to pull away, that smothered and sickened, that dragged it down into depths so frigid they forgot all but what refused to leave. It was just... fleeting. Terribly so.

They thought, briefly, to chase it, to lean in its direction in hope it came back their way, to linger in the brief *warmth*— so rare in these frigid waters— it provided, but it was too far gone. And they weren't allowed to linger.

They shivered anyway; forgive them, they couldn't help it. It was time to change again. They bowed their head and awaited the other touches, the ones that stayed, the ones they did not *want* to stay.

They never came. Mercy.

Another hand— or the same? Was it possible for it to be the same?— brushed from their cheek up to the bottom of their eye, where the tears spilled from. Wiped away nothing and

left faster than the hesitance in which it approached.

They were frustrated. Could they tell it ‘no?’ Quiet hiccuped. Could he just *stay*? They would be good, they promised.

Carefully, *infuriatingly* carefully, Nando placed his palm back against Quiet’s cheek. Their eyes were open before, though they only realized after they closed them. If the pattern repeated, which patterns tended to do, then they wouldn’t have this for long; and he was likely to quit once Quiet stabilized, they knew. They had to enjoy it while it lasted, they couldn’t be greedy.

It was warm, and soft, and gentle. Everything Quiet knew him to be. Truly, Nando touched them like he wasn’t sure he had the right to; like he was waiting for them to flinch back instead of lean in closer. If there was anyone who had the most right to it...

The pattern broke, but not in the way it should have. His palm shifted more to the side of their face, touch still exceedingly light as if preparing to leave at the slightest indication or excuse, and Quiet had their face *cupped* instead of held. In two hands, raised gently, just barely exerting the slightest of pressures but expelling so, so much warmth. Their entire head felt warm. What the hell was wrong with Nando’s hands that they felt so warm? Was that a problem? Was he getting sick?

That they’d dipped their head forward a bit was not high on Quiet’s priority list of things to pay attention to. They wanted him to stay, almost overflowing with the feeling. And he was.

He *still* hadn’t pulled away, even though he had before. They were pretty sure he was going to soon. And yet, with each passing second, they were proven wrong. Each passing second, they were just a touch warmer.

Their eyelids felt sticky and almost swollen. Heavy. Heavy like their head, warm and fuzzy, dipping into the hold without even really meaning to. Nando was having to hold their head up for them. Would he just stay like that until they pulled back? They felt idle, of their own volition. Testing their limits, maybe. How else were they supposed to know his rules?

“Can you do something for me?”

Quiet almost didn’t hear, overwhelmed as they were. Couldn’t nod even if they wanted to, but knew the correct answer to that one.

*(Desperation) Anything, **anything**.*

(Bargaining) Just don't leave.

He looked pained. That wasn’t— What had they done wrong?

Quiet went to sit up, to move closer, to do something, and—

His vision went white with pain, tremulously giving way to numbness. Like his mind was trying to yank him away, and the pain coursing through his body was shoving him straight back. He could hear his own breath coming in labored, panicked near-shrieks.

Disconnected and overwhelming all at once. *Fury*, he thought, and it made an ungodly amount of sense.

“Hey, hey, stay with me here,” Nando said, and wasn’t that a reversal? Quiet wondered if the way his thumbs had gently swiped up his face for a moment was intentional. It was an unfamiliar sensation, if nothing else. Completely unlike whatever hellish blight was just released on his nervous system, or anything he could remember. “It’s alright, I’m not going anywhere. I’m right here. Wherever you think you are, you’re not, you’re just here with me.”

I know, he wanted to say, but his mouth wouldn’t work. Motionless with pain. Of course that was his basest state, he wasn’t Movement Itself. What *was* he?

The question haunted him.

None of his Voices were meant to rise, let alone his own, and he was not his body to move it into a dance. He was not contrast, or the possibility of meaning, for She was all of those things, She said.

And he was nothing at all, to be woven into something by Everything. But ‘nothing’ couldn’t exist, She said, so he (it?) had to be something.

But that would mean it was something being woven into something else, and why was the something else so important that the something couldn’t be left alone? (Why was She the weaver? Who had decided that? Her? He said He made it, and Her. How cruel, to give a receptacle sentence.)

He was back in his body and it *hurt*. (Before, there was a brief moment before it hurt, could he go back to that?)

There was still warmth, though. He didn’t want to go back to *before* that.

He recentered. Recorrected himself using the heat on his face as a grounding point, recalling the sensation on his face (he had his face; it had to be affirmed, he didn’t always) and the hands responsible for it and the person they belonged to. Long brown hair that framed his face, a face adorned with moles like the stars in his wings, and most critically: round, dark eyes the picturesque definition of the word “gentle.” The sort of eyes that told him he didn’t need to worry about anything else.

“Hey, buddy,” Nando said, in a tone that made Quiet think of waking up in a forest made of chains and hooks that dug into his hands. And he didn’t want to worry him, never, but—

Can’t move. It hurts.

Quiet could feel the slightest flinch in the tendons of Nando’s hands before he registered the movement with his eyes. Conflicting instructions, perhaps; Quiet could reverse engineer that sort of expression from his own impressions of the struggle. He could clarify it without needing to stop and question.

(Clarification) Not you.

...Should he apologize?

As if in retaliation towards the very thought, Nando swept his thumb under Quiet's eye again. No; he'd started crying again. He didn't even realize he'd started. That was pathetic, shameful. What was wrong with him?

What would Connie think, if he saw them like that? What would Ave think? Or— or Ciro, or Harri? Scared and crying like a *child*.

(He didn't have to wonder about Nando. He was there. He could read that expression. He didn't deserve someone like him.)

Nando swallowed before he spoke. "What will make it stop hurting?"

Nothing, Quiet thought. Then, *I don't know*. Then, *I don't want to be here*. Then, *it will pass*. Then, *you don't have to worry about me*. Then, and then, and then, but none of them were choices that could be made.

He didn't want to be alone.

(Reassurance) Then you don't have to be.

Was it that easy?

Was it fair to him? They were disgusting, they *felt* disgusting, their clothes soaked through with a cold sweat that chilled them to the bone, and Nando must've been about to go to breakfast, they didn't want to impose—

Nando always was a lot less indecisive than they were. Quiet only had to mourn the loss of the warmth for moments before the covers were thrown off them, an arm under their knees, the other on their back. The world faded for a moment when they were picked up, white-hot pain searing them. And then they were suspended, their side pressed firmly into his chest, struggling for balance and finding purchase of it around Nando's neck.

Their hands tingled painfully when they came in contact with him, slowly regaining feeling. Like blood and body heat had stopped being transported to them until then.

For a brief moment, the fear of being left was supplanted with the fear of being much more literally dropped. But that was ridiculous. This was Nando. He wouldn't let go. (Quiet, if he thought back—or sideways—could imagine the feeling of something fragile and precious in both his hands that he could callously release. Quiet could. But Hero never liked it.)

They weren't *that* fragile, were they?

Nando lifted them in an odd motion, the speed of it disobeying how his hands held onto them, and paused slightly, adjusting their elevation minutely, slowly, as if testing their weight. (Or, as if rocking them in his arms, but that was wishful thinking; Quiet wasn't sure what *was* happening, but nothing like that would ever happen for him. The internal peace he derived from the motion was his own delusion.)

Nando's hold shifted, his hand along their back traveling to the spot near where their spine met their vertebrae, the spot between their shoulders and where their two truer limbs sprouted from the muscles in their back. Quiet felt the touch so strongly he wondered if Nando could feel the ridges. He tensed in the way one would when feeling something brush against the neck, shoulders hiked up involuntarily.

Was something else wrong with them?

"You weigh *nothing*," Nando blurted suddenly, voice quiet but still heard on account of the sheer proximity from one to another.

That made sense. He didn't know why Nando looked so uncomfortable about it.

There was a certain concern in the furrow of Nando's eyebrows and the press of his lips, but when he turned to genuinely look at Quiet in his arms the expression softened into something Quiet found hard to look at, between the rocking and the warmth and the vertigo and the pain.

He kept shivering. Their time there with everyone had spoiled them, clearly. He had kept still through more and through worse.

It was when Nando finally stopped looking at him and started walking out of the room that the dots connected and clicked in Quiet's brain; *right*, he was being carried. He'd carried Princesses before, and been dragged by the wrist other times; he was familiar with the idea. Though carrying someone typically implied a destination.

(Question) (Uncertainty) Where are we going?

Oddly, the use of the word 'we' settled something in their chest.

(Answer) (Reassurance) You didn't want to be alone.

The answer was so obvious Quiet couldn't believe it eluded him in the first place. He knew the route by heart. Knew the room. Had most of his things in that room, even, after...

...after he'd moved them. (Something made him think it was a better idea.) They were already in Nando's room by the time Quiet finished the thought. He couldn't remember how Nando had opened the door, with the way his hands were full. Quiet would've noticed if he'd been adjusted or put down in some way, so he had to assume the door was already open to them both.

Given what Quiet knew of him, it still surprised them that Nando still forgot to make the bed on a regular basis, given the mess that were the covers. Everything was, technically, still on the bed, but neither neat nor tidy. There was more to take in about the room—the desk with an opened sketchbook sat on top of it next to an assortment of pencils, its chair not scooted in but turned out for easy access and sitting; the bookshelf not quite full but far from empty; the hung sketches on the walls, new, that Quiet didn't recognize and wanted to see—but it was all but cursory as Quiet was gently deposited right in the middle of said not-quite-unmade bed.

Only, there was someone already in it, too.

A deep chill settled into Quiet's back as mist was pressed outward from his point of contact, a feminine voice looping around him close to his neck and ear. She yelped, though not loudly — awake enough to be considerate, then— and he felt a cold air pass through him as Grace shifted out from under him to roll over at his side.

She glanced, incredulously, to the edge of the bed where Nando still stood, hands already raised in a placating gesture.

“My, my, taking initiative are we?” Grace teased, her face lighting up in a playful grin as she rolled from her side onto her stomach and held her chin up with her hands, feet kicking behind her. Quiet could see the way the bed dipped. There was *weight*.

“Nightmare,” Nando offered as an explanation while Quiet tried to figure out how to ask what he wanted. Grace looked between him and Quiet, and he felt something in his chest tug a bit when she looked at him. Were her eyes... less sunken, than before?

(Empathy) You alright there, killer?

She took to that fast. Her hand reached out to brush his own, tingling from the cold, still something between dead and not-dead. But he could feel her. Could feel the texture of skin and the way her fingers brushed against his palm. Even moreso than when she checked for him if he were a ghost like her, so long ago, one of the few times his hand had been held without him having to prompt it himself. Real, despite everything.

It struck him that she hadn't done her little circle yet. Why it did, he wasn't sure, he hadn't been here longer than a few seconds and he'd made his entrance by falling on top of her, but the absence of the routine...

(...Sincerity) No.

It still hurt. Everywhere. He wanted that gone.

He reached back out to Grace's hand, and she understood, scooting closer to him. Cool air surrounded him, a gentle mist that took the pressure off his shoulders. She rested her chin on the front of his shoulder, her arm reaching across his chest. A temperature change that did not shock; merely the drop of a couple degrees, at most. Enough to get comfortable with, or at least it was supposed to be.

He wasn't there anymore, he wasn't alone, but why did he still feel scared?

Grace lifted her head off his side, and her hand drifted from his chest to pick up his hand in her own. He saw the way her gaze turned distant as she checked his pulse, reminded of a memory of a precious few not yet stained with blood. He hadn't seen that focused expression in quite some time. The way she stared ahead aimlessly, the way her lips parted just slightly as her fingertips pressed in and he felt his wrist go pleasantly numb, the way her head tilted just barely as if she truly were 'listening' to something she knew only by touch.

He didn't look dead, she said; and he didn't *feel* dead, either.

An accurate assessment, even now, even if he'd died too many times to count; he never *could* die. 'Dead' was the one thing he could never be or stay. He didn't need to feel for his pulse like Grace did to affirm this; it roared in his ears in the quiet moments all the same.

Her eyes refocused, and her hand rubbed Quiet's wrist reassuringly as she settled back to their side, though not quite fully enveloping them as she had before. (Not quite trapping them in place, pinning them down, forbidding their movement.) She was making room for someone else.

Said someone else was getting on the bed from their other side. Quiet wasn't really sure what he was doing, really—they *knew*, but they didn't, because they'd only ever *woken up* in these kinds of positions, by accident, by unconscious movements. They shifted, trying to accommodate and welcome regardless, because that was what he wanted.

"Killer?" Grace asked. Nando paused. He heard all movement cease.

It was almost a relief. He did something wrong. The tension could be released. He very carefully made sure his body was as relaxed as it could be. It was better in the long run.

"...This is for *you*," Nando said hesitantly, haltingly. Familiar. Good. It was always for the greater good, for his own sake; he understood, he'd been taught as much before. Nando backed up as if under threat of being burnt. Quiet didn't understand why. Was this the punishment? The relinquishing of touch?

He really was too good for them, if that was the worst that could happen if they broke a rule.

"Quiet, do you *want*... do *you* want to be held?" Nando asked. Grace shifted back from them, too, then. Left alone with only the burning of his skin to keep him company. (Disgusting.)

"Yes," Quiet said without thinking, the answer as automatic as the response was trained.

"Do you mean it?"

What did that mean? It was the kind of question, the kind of phrase, Quiet only knew in one context, and no other.

'I meant it, when I said I wanted to dance,' she'd said, and Quiet took her hands in his and cast her in a wide spin. A wide smile and genuine affection on her face, despite the black trails from her eyes and the slight cold from her clammy hands.

He'd asked her, then, if there were anything in the world she could do, what she'd choose for herself, and that was what she said she wanted. Finally able to speak for herself, despite the shadow behind her that snapped at her and held her to it and bound her for itself to keep; to speak for herself, rather than what she was supposed to want and be and what would make him happy. Affirmed again before he'd honored it.

She said she wanted to dance, her deepest wish from the bottom of her heart. If there were nothing else in the world but her, that is what she wished to do. She 'meant' it.

Quiet tried to reverse it. If there were one thing, one thing, *only* one thing they could do, what would they choose? No wrong answer. No bad decision. (They closed their eyes. A guilty pleasure.)

‘Want.’ They didn’t ‘want’ to be alone. That was the root of it. (They weren’t alone with Her. It *wasn’t* what they wanted, with Her.)

What did that have to do with being held? Nando wanted to hold them, Quiet didn’t want to be alone, it should be a fair compromise. That their flesh boiled under their skin from contacts they couldn’t name and their head felt light and airy like it was primed to float away and their heart was pounding so loud they could feel it in their skull was all temporary. And how it worked.

(Lie) (Overwhelm) I mean it.

(Clarification) You’re thinking about what I want. Ignore me.

A request they did not want to honor. His warmth made the burning stop, or at least juxtaposed it; to ignore one was to invite the other. Frustration built in their throat and behind their eyes and they swallowed it, pushed it down deep into their empty stomach.

They wanted. They wanted. They wanted. Was it in their nature to want? They wanted so much they felt like it would kill them.

Quiet never met a ghost that wasn’t secretly starving.

For... a lot of things.

The smell of flowers. Hot chocolate. Sunlight. Goosebumps and hunger. Fresh air. The whole-body burning after running. The kind of emotional restlessness that gets dissipated after a hug. The sleepiness not adhered to that made one remember why emotions were called ‘feelings,’ translated from concept to ache somewhere in the body. The fuzzy edges at the boundary of dreams. Waking up slowly.

The nature of a ghost was to linger.

Some of the ones he had met hungered for love, most of the others for freedom. A thrill. Something to make them a mockery of alive.

He didn’t know why. Ghosts felt *everything*.

He was dead. He was dying. They had gone and killed him. He wondered if being stabbed would have been better. Dying was so commonplace they blurred together. It didn’t usually take that long. It usually wasn’t that slow. He was rotting away, piece by piece, bloating and withering and unraveling right there where he laid, laid like the dead were laid to rest in a coffin or an urn, but he couldn’t relax to rest for the life of him.

He wanted *someone with him*, and he was overfull with the feeling, like if he bent the wrong way he would rip apart. It ran deeper than the flesh or its burning, the burning which

scratched and pried away pieces of his soul, his soul full to the brim with a different kind of burning. The burning of a need unmet.

He wanted someone *there*.

He didn't want to hurt anyone. (His nails weren't sharp enough anymore, anyway.) He didn't want to take them the way he'd been taken. To be given, a better alternative, but he didn't want to *hurt* anyone. He wanted the opposite. He wanted to protect, to heal, to care.

It was quiet. And he could feel everything.

He didn't want this *distance*. He didn't want the space they allotted him, like he were made of glass, like he couldn't reach out or else they'd pull back. Like they wouldn't dare be touch him. Like he were a vile thing to be touched *by*. In their rejection, he'd be truly alone.

And he never met a ghost that wasn't secretly starving.

Including himself.

He opened his eyes to the same old scene, the same near-empty bed. He took a deep breath to find some way to compose himself, wrapped himself in his own arms and felt death squirming like maggots in his skin. Hurting, still.

He tried to understand the way Grace was looking at him then. Something in her gaze had shifted in line with his thoughts. What was she thinking?

He had known her rules before. Rules could be changed on a whim before, the same could apply there.

"I don't *get it*," Quiet said, voice breaking in a short, sad wisp. "I just— I want you here. With me. I want to have you here, I mean it, I swear, *please*— What do I have to do to earn that? What did I do wrong? What rule did I break that you don't want to be around me anymore?"

He was glad he *could* ask questions with them.

"No, killer," Grace started, her voice clear and soft, "we didn't mean that. We *do* want to touch you. We'll touch you as much as you want."

Nando choked on air.

Grace paid him no mind, her head tilting forward in Quiet's direction, her eyes catching his. "But..." she sighed wearily. "Quiet, do *you*... have 'rules?'"

...

...

...What?

Quiet had been right before, Grace *was* the strangest Princess he'd ever met.

He wasn't supposed to have rules. He never asked Her if he could. He couldn't have enforced them, it wasn't in his nature to hurt, or at least he wouldn't have chosen to if he could help it. He didn't want anyone to be hurt, including himself, so he learned by experience and did everything he could.

There were tugs on his threads. He would pay attention to them after, he promised.

He was taking too long to come up with any sort of response to that, apparently, because Grace continued for him. "Okay," she said, her voice a bit strained. "We can work on that, killer, you're alright. You don't want to be alone?"

That was *critical*. The need to make up for his mistakes choked him. Quiet couldn't speak. He shook his head. Grace nodded.

"Okay. How about this? Since you're overwhelmed, and you want us here," Grace counted the two statements on her index and middle fingers, like they were making a list together. Quiet watched the gesture, uncertain of what it indicated. "Instead of *us* holding *you*, *you* can hold us?... Well, I'm down a body here. Maybe just him, and I'll help you out."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I know you're tired. Come here."

The bed dipped on the other side, blankets being moved around to make room for the owner of the bed. Grace gestured for Quiet to scoot, so he did, and she patted it invitingly, one hand outstretched as if to take his and lead him to his resting grounds.

To his credit, Nando did *try* to take her hand as if on impulse, their palms intersecting, pale air wavering at the point of connection—and then Grace's hand closed, as if it were physical and real, and Nando jumped a bit as if surprised by a sudden draft or chill. Quiet glanced at Grace and couldn't help but be surprised at how wide her smile stretched, eyes almost glistening with new life, crinkling at the edges.

(Appreciation) You're a miracle worker, killer.

Quiet had no clue what that meant. He hadn't really done much, had he?...

She pulled back and Nando was pulled with her, following her lead as she settled into the bed and had him lean onto her, her upper body twisting so that she could lean her head onto his chest and she hugged him from the side. Nando tucked his arm beneath her and brought it up and around her midsection, pulling her back into him.

Grace nestled into him for a bit, perhaps testing the position, perhaps simply lingering as ghosts tended to do. Then, after a brief moment, she lifted her head, her face close to his, and whispered something to him in light and breezy tones. Nando blinked a couple times as whatever she'd said sank in, and then twisted his neck to avert his gaze, embarrassed.

Grace smiled, warm despite the chill, and looked back up at Quiet expectantly. No, not expectant. Curious? Accommodating?

“Does that sound nice, killer?” She asked, and Quiet looked at the arrangement. A sensation like itching spread across his arms like goosebumps.

It did. It sounded very nice.

She tilted her head. “The decision is yours.”

Nando, having averted his eyes for the interaction, glanced up at Quiet then. His stare was pointed, regarding him with soft intensity, a question in his eyes. Quiet wanted to hold him, to cradle his face, to rest with him, like he had in dozens of different mornings where it was okay; it was okay to cherish, to be cherished, okay to want things, to be wanted. They wanted to linger, to be the last to let go, to keep him as long as he could stand.

The question shifted from gaze to posture as Nando, barely, opened his arms in universal gesture. Not reaching for them, to grab, to claim; opening up to them, to invite, to welcome. He looked relaxed. He looked relaxing.

Quiet wondered, briefly, what they looked like in the gesture to break apart the whole affair. How they’d *surrendered* themselves compared to how Nando was *offering* now. There was a difference in it. They liked the way Nando looked.

They didn’t think they would ever be able to tell him ‘no.’ But it felt more like a decision than a presumption, now, to say ‘yes.’ Still, they didn’t think they’d ever *not* say yes. Not to him. Not to this. So, they accepted the offer.

They were getting tired. Maybe he’d feel better after sleeping.

Quiet felt... awkward. He wasn't sure how to lay across someone, or how to scoop his arm beneath Nando like he would a pillow to pull it closer to him as he leaned into it, to nuzzle and sink into. He knew he *had*, but he didn’t know *how*.

It was a tentative action, gentle and slow, unable to take in the moment as anything but just about as slow as he approached. In reality, it couldn't have been longer than a handful of seconds at most, but it felt much longer. Far more drawn out. He reached beneath Nando's arm to wrap around his back, up and across to be close to his opposite shoulder, his other arm mirroring the motion as the rest of his body curled up halfway at his side and halfway on his chest. That he'd more or less copied the pose he was in when Nando picked him up earlier was unconscious to him as he laid his head in the crook of his neck. He breathed in, light and soft, to take in the warmth, the presence.

Scents of tree bark and oils, of soil, of outside air. The woods. He smelled like the woods on a cool winter day, like crisp, dried, dead leaves crunching underfoot; like the grass and the underbrush. Familiar. Safe. He felt himself starting to relax, body tired and worn from things that happened too long ago and too recently, crumbling under the lightest pressure.

He closed his eyes, a moment; there was nothing he had to perceive or bare witness to, nowhere for him to be. Just here. Just like this. He willed himself to stay. This was a presence Quiet could sink into, woods he could get lost in, a warmth to soak in.

The warmth did not stop the burning. It did not disappear right away, there was no magic spell or great relief. But as Nando adjusted beneath him, miniscule movements, the sound of rustling sheets as Nando's arm reached around to pull the blankets over he, Quiet, and Grace, Quiet felt it might be okay. It didn't matter.

He caught Nando's arm before he'd pulled away entirely, Nando's breath hitching and hand going still, and Quiet chose to guide it to wrap around his back and rest near the middle of his side. Nando tucked his arm in, settling, and Quiet risked the chance to open his eyes to see he was already looking at him. Halfway between attentive and comfortable, eyes lidded but bright from what he could see of them. A look that reminded Quiet of a question in the dead of night he wasn't sure he understood, even now. *'Is this okay?'* Sure it was. This was more than okay.

Quiet tucked himself back, the arm slung across Nando's front tightening around him. Warmth, he was warm, he was warm.

Grace, too, moved closer to them both. He could feel her arm overlapping with his, could feel how she'd settled not into Nando's neck, but instead his chest, her face pointed in Quiet's direction if any indication by the rhythmic breaths of mist he felt on his face. Snuggling together, he almost thought, with this pillow they both shared. He reached for her hand, and she reached back, and he took it gingerly between his hold of them both. From Nando's shoulder to the side of her face at his chest.

Her thumb rubbed against his hand, barely movement at all, and the little pins and needles transferred on through the rest of him. He reached, mind hazier and unable to stop himself, and cupped her cheek in his hand. She blinked at him, slow and bleary, and Quiet marveled at those framed eyes.

She patted his hand and rubbed at his wrist almost absentmindedly. Chill, he was cool, he was cool.

The burning was not all he had; in fact, Quiet thought as he started copying the rhythm of Nando's breathing and could feel the rise and fall of his chest, the burning didn't even have to be a priority.

He closed his eyes. Just... for a moment...

The sun was *barely* peeking out of the sky, he knew because the first thing he did after terror stopped choking him was to open the blinds. Waking up terrified out of his wits wasn't bad enough, it seemed, it had to be at ungodly hours of the morning. Way too early to be up.

Contrary to what Oleander had expected before, three people did apologize to him. It was about time, considering he had risked his life and all. Their methods, though...

Harri had already been in the kitchen by the time Oli made his way over, holding a mug of jet black coffee and looking like he'd been up at least an hour or so already. Oli did as Oli's do and made cheery small-talk on his way to siphon the profits of others' labor, fixing himself a heavily-sweetened cup of coffee himself and pointedly ignoring how disgusted Harri looked by the fifth tablespoon of straight sugar. As Oli was getting himself a glass of water, Harri handed him what he initially thought was a packet of paperwork.

"What's this?" He asked.

"Tabi's apology," Harri answered. Oli didn't acknowledge externally how Harri refused to implicate himself in it; just took it.

Tabitha left him a 25-page manuscript, her handwriting was *minuscule* and she used contractions. He knew, he read it. Both the 5-page apology and the 20-page overly-detailed plans for what to do if the situation happened again, both with Felipe or if Tabi was as out of control as before. Several pages were dedicated to knife disarming techniques, self-defense, and threat neutralization shortcuts—one of which reminded Oli of what Ave claimed to have seen Cain do, maybe he'd cross-reference; several more to specific phrases and negotiation techniques specialized *to her* regarding de-escalation (as if he hadn't made his own private, safeguarded list, especially by now). There was *one* thank you, nondescript; Oli half-heartedly tried to interpret it as a thanks for everything. It didn't do much good for his mood, with how focused the paper was on its author instead of him. It was evident the girl had never heard of brevity before, straddling the line of self-flagellation.

Plan A was open communication of intent and information; he'd half a mind to cross it out as soon as he read it, because in the situation itself she didn't give him time for that at all. The list abruptly stopped at Contingency Plan H with an addendum that there were additions to be made, but the text had been handed-in as it were for swift reviewal.

Oleander knew a code-word when he read it. The passive language wasn't doing Tabitha any favors, either, especially considering how *Harri* had been the one to hand-off the book to Oli in the first place. She'd only stopped because she'd been forced, and she'd relented because she felt bad.

It was laughably vulnerable in its thinly-veiled remorse. *She* was trying to build a bridge with *him*? Maybe she didn't remember that his name used to be Opportunist.

Beyond the fact that he could certainly use this information as her enemy as easily as her 'ally,' he just didn't agree with the methodology. Making up plans on the spot was better than all these pre-written ones—what if someone unsavory, like himself, found them? Not to mention Tabi *knew* all the contingency plans she'd written for use against herself.

A good contingency plan couldn't be for oneself — people were biased when talking about themselves most of all, and invariably tended to overlook things that an outside view would pick up on. Tabitha marked herself as observant without taking note of how surface-level tricks could work their way into her head. Oli figured if he just bold-faced lied to her often enough, she'd spiral to find a nonexistent greater truth he was hiding from her—and from there he could more or less tell her whatever he wanted, as long as the wild goose chase continued.

And as long as Harri didn't pick on his tricks, either. Someone had to teach her she wasn't infallible. Intellectuals loathed the smart idiot. That was the trick with people who thought of themselves too highly, or tied themselves to a particular label. As Oli himself had found out.

"What's that, homework?" Connie asked, sliding into the seat next to him with way too much finesse; he wanted something. The bedhead he was sporting was almost impressive. Did he get up just to see Oli?

The coffee hadn't done his job, or it really wasn't a good hour to be up, considering he found himself nodding off into his mug. He groaned half-heartedly. "I wish."

Connie had pleasantly surprised him with a sequel to the book he had been reading, complete with a little bow. He should have seen coming that in the most exciting part of it the action would grind to an actual *halt* with a scene that even Oli could see was supposed to be a mirror to an actual apology.

He didn't know what to think about the character that was supposed to be him, other than he was glad it wasn't included in any raunchy scenes. He was more of a side-character, written like an afterthought, only really noteworthy for the one scene and otherwise forgettable for the rest of the story. But then he was forced to *think* when he was supposed to, for once, turn his brain off.

Who knew Connie was *shy* regarding apologies?

Mercifully, it wasn't far off from the time Paco came into the kitchen to cook breakfast for the rest of them. Typically this meant everyone currently in the kitchen— typically not Oli, because why would he wake up when there wasn't someone else's cooking to leech off of? — got shooed out. Connie vacated the room in advance; from the sound down the hall, it seemed Connie just went back to bed. That Oli didn't have the wherewithal to follow routine and ended up in a social faux pas for their group was truly a testament to how much he valued his good sleep hygiene.

...and his glass of water was gone. So that was what Connie had been after.

Breakfast, usually, was something like toast with jam or dulce de leche, fruit on the side, maybe a glass of yoghurt or milk, because even Paco couldn't be fancy this early.

It wasn't fancy today, either, but the portion size... That man didn't know how to be subtle at all. Normally, Oli wouldn't complain, he *was* a good cook, and Oli only needed a few more centimeters to pass Felipe when he was normal, but why wouldn't he apologize like a normal person?! Just to annoy him?

...considering his behavior in his own route, he was inclined to go with 'yes.' At least he wasn't being passive-aggressive about it. He chewed mechanically, not tasting much. His stomach rebelled against eating quite so soon.

He agreed, in his own way. *He* rebelled against waking up so soon.

But it wasn't in his control, what had woken him up in the first place.

Oleander had always thought that the realization one was fundamental would be a glorious one, something that cemented his place among the flock. Something that made him feel important.

It was anything but, his throat clogged with desperation.

He was exhausted. All of the past few days was weighing on him; he hadn't truly rested and he doubted he'd be doing so now. Not there. Not with their eyes on him. The dynamics of this group they were in were changing faster than he could stomach them; two tossed out, even if rightfully so, and last night he laid awake wondering if he were close to being the third, because a knife was held to his throat and none of them had moved and it was his choice that led Quiet to a worse place and another breakdown.

He swallowed and ignored it. He didn't want to think about the silence or the itching. Like his skin was shredding. It was a bad job. How he'd worked so hard to push them all out just to pull them back in again, how he'd been *used* and the compromise was only a loss, how he fell right into the spider's web and spun it himself to catch the others; he'd done a bad job.

He wanted to go to his room, to eat; his leg bounced with the need to move, flee, escape. *Not cut out for this*, he wanted to think, but he couldn't admit to being weak; the others needed to be tricked into thinking he was a pillar of stability for them all, a leader in times of duress, someone to flock around instead of someone to discard. He just needed to stay important. And he couldn't walk off when Paco was relieving himself of the burden of symbolic apology with a meal Oli didn't have the stomach for.

He was *there* to catch that, to know when he was being used, manipulated, tricked. His instincts thrived in the perils of networking and connection, to be close enough to be helped but not to be hurt. To take for oneself and leave the rest. He had *defenses*. But he couldn't defend his actions even to himself.

Had he proven himself useful, yet? He couldn't tell. No one was *saying anything* to him.

There were no words to go off of. And in a tangible environment, all he could *feel* was his mask slipping and his door loosening on its hinges. And with both, he knew Quiet was worse, and if there were any indication of his good effort it had to be that, because that was what everyone was centered on. And in the margins of the page, another plan doomed from the start and an inescapable cabin with a computer with a file that told him he didn't have the administrative position required to do what needed to be done. He didn't have *permission*.

It was like the god herself was laughing at him.

He blinked from where he had been studying his partially full mug. When had *Ciro* gotten there? He was standing farther back than he usually did, not in his usual spot.

A while later, came Oli's ex... (ex what? What could someone who was the only other being in the universe be called?) ...ex princess. Something about the way she moved jumped at him. Too sluggish, not overtly, but like her movements dragged in the air; not as light on her feet as she tended to be. Her footsteps made noise when connecting with the ground. Not so sneaky today.

She kept glancing back, where only Ciro was standing. He didn't set his eyes on her the entire time Oli watched them. The silent treatment wasn't something he would do, himself, but it would be effective on him with enough time passing. Would it be effective on her?

Ave was sitting beside him. Oli hadn't seen him coming. He didn't know how he should interpret the gesture that came next; a grin or a baring of teeth.

The entire routine was already thrown off, Ave should have been running with Gonchi. Yet Gonchi had not yet appeared. Oli, and everyone else he was sure, had heard him with Ava long into the night. It was impossible not to hear. He had gotten cotton for his ears at some point. He should move rooms.

"Thank you," Ave was saying, shattering his thoughts. Because Oleander was surely dreaming right then.

Avellano, of all people, thanking him? The same person he had to switch places with, when it became clear Cain was only escalating the conflict—? No, wait, he could see why he was being thanked now. As he *should have* from the beginning, instead of having a knife at his throat!

Ave, like him, knew how to spot dangerous people. The difference between them was the way they fought back. Ave's way to fight back lacked finesse, would have escalated things. Oli had temporarily diffused the situation, *placing himself in mortal danger* by doing so.

Clearly, Oli emphasized to himself, Ave was one of the few with functioning eyes to see the obvious! Wait, he was about to say something, he couldn't miss it. Ave wasn't one to talk much as it was.

"You held him back," Ave said. Oli couldn't read just which 'he' Ave was implying. Maybe all of them! "You've adapted for our advantage. Specialization is an individual's domain, but a united pack is stronger than a lone hunter. You'll be paid back, someday."

Oli rearranged his ranking once more. Who would have thought Ave was one of the most observant ones after himself?

Ave bared his teeth in a light smile, eyes glinting. "Wordsmith."

He liked the sound of that.

"That's not what we should be talking about— Ave, stop, that's his—" Oli stopped observing Paco and whipped his head to see Ave with his mouth full. No question where he had gotten that. He'd be paid back for *multiple* things, then; sure, he wasn't really intending on finishing his plate and it was more of a relief of burden that he didn't have to play an receiving role of Paco's gift, but he'd signed no deal with Ave on the matter, so he was still in violation of conventional social contract. He would exploit that later, when a good time came. Paco continued, "we're still in danger."

Oli bit back how Paco had not been anywhere near the danger. Ave gave him a closed-mouth smile that didn't suit him. His upper lip was too short for that, making the expression

unnatural.

“I don’t think we should return, either—”

“Not talking about that,” Paco bit back, and Ave straightened at once as he swallowed. Oli was missing something; they stared at each other in a certain understanding. Ave tilted his head like he was listening for something. In turn, Oli sharpened his hearing.

...What was he listening for? He glanced at Ave, but Ave wasn’t paying attention to him—now *that* was concerning.

“He’s not here, everything’s in order,” Ave announced. “For now, at least.”

“Six sets of heartbeats,” Paco agreed. “Though I’m not sure Cain’s heart beats at all.”

“His blood runs lukewarm, cold like a dead thing,” Ave said. “Tastes decayed and rotten, and lingers long after you’ve washed the substance itself out. Numbs the tongue like a poison, coats the mouth like a film.”

“He’s a fuckin’ *poison*, alright,” Ciro said. “Par for the course. Hated sharing even a little bit of headspace with that guy. Felt bad and wrong, like he was breathing down my neck, fucking freak.”

Harri glanced at each of them behind his glasses, then turned to Winnie. “Do you hear that? That’s the sound of *biases*.”

Paco rounded on him. “Your name was *Skeptic*.”

Winnie inched a bit away from Harri, settling nearer to Ciro by proxy. Harri blinked. “And *your* name was Paranoid.”

“You did not just fucking say that,” Ciro snipped defensively.

Oli stood up, Ave raising his head to stare at him. He waved his hands to catch the rooms’ attention. “Alright, alright, boys, we don’t need to start calling names. What are we talking about? I don’t know about our other guests, but as for me, personally, I’m a bit lost on the topic of conversation and would *love* a debrief so I can start engaging with you.” He inhaled deeply through the nose to avoid yawning.

“I’m *saying*... that we ought to be a little more skeptical of the guy that needed his hand bitten before he stopped trying to dig his fingers into other people’s heads,” Paco said, tone tense as if he were holding himself back from saying something more direct. Harri flexed his hand, tapping the tips of his fingers on the table a couple times in rhythm. “Nothing’s changed between then and now but the fact that he thinks he’s been given even more incentive to get Quiet alone with him when we aren’t looking.”

“Cain’s help really isn’t the death-sentence you three are seeing it as,” Harri told them.

“Oh, and how do *you* know?”

“How do you think?” He asked. Rhetorically. Oli felt a switch flick in the room. The air changed; it went still, silent, stale, as if the life of it had drained out from a slit in its throat. He could hear a pin drop in this atmosphere, he thought, but no one spoke. Waiting for Mr. Planmaker to elaborate on the fact that he’d let Cain... what, exactly?

“It’s nothing bad,” Harri said. “Ciro, you know I had to patch him up. And he could tell I wasn’t handling... any of it, really, well enough to keep myself rational. So he just took it.”

“What do you mean he ‘took it?’” Paco asked, voice wavering as if it trembled in the dead air.

Harri paused, as if recalling the memory took effort on his end. “It doesn’t feel *bad*. It’s just like... if I hadn’t slept but a couple hours, or not at all. I felt disjointed, but not irrevocably; I was back to business as usual the next morning. I slept it off. And I was, and *am*, perfectly fine now.”

“That is not an answer to my question. What did he take?”

Another pause. Longer this time. “I just stopped feeling. Much of anything. It was harder to think, was all,” Harri started, then stopped himself. Scowled like he’d realized he was describing the feeling again, dancing around a question he wasn’t meaning to dance around. He tapped his hand on the table a few more times. The silence lingered. “He took what was bothering me. The... the thing with Clara, how we all were and the lack of answers... he took away my care for it, the direct pathway to think about it at all; it’s just not worth considering, there’s nothing there for me to work with. Another way to put it: he took ‘me’ out of that situation. I still know what’s missing.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“It was *pragmatic*,” Harri defended. He moved as if to grab something, then stopped. “If I had my notes with me, I’d open them up and show you. I can’t pay attention if I’m overemotional about every little thing that happens; Quiet needs someone who can see things for what they are and explain it all back to him. There’s enough people here who can empathize. *Someone* has to get to the root of all this and pick out the rhetoric in his head, implanted by Transformation or by the other two...”

He stalled, looking for a word.

“Wretches,” Winnie finished for him. He nodded, satisfied with that, but she kept going. “And I don’t think it’s ‘pragmatic’. If I didn’t have my emotions, I wouldn’t have taken steps to ensure *he*,” she pointed to Oli, “wouldn’t hurt me again.”

“It’s not ‘little,’” Ciró pointed out. He looked like he was caught between indignant rage and horrified concern. “Nothing about what happened with Clara was ‘little,’ that’s why it was such bullshit.”

“And you two can remember and hold onto that,” Harri pointed between Ciró and Winnie. “Keep the emotional score. I’m doing something useful and holding onto the rhetoric for us.”

“I’ll show you fucking useful—”

“I’m the rhetoric guy,” Oli said. Reminded him, honestly.

“The truth, then,” Harri amended. The dead air felt just a touch colder, then; infested with secrecy. “What Transformation *really* did to him; what it all *means*.”

“You think I can’t do that, too?” Oli asked a rhetorical question of his own. “I’m *the* guy to come to for advice on how to be selfish, you know. I am *all about* self-worth. Selfishness isn’t something bad—”

“Bias.” Harri shut him down. Oli inhaled deeply. There was no reason to let him know he was treading dangerous waters. Harri squinted at him, then leaned in his direction, voice lowering. “Entiendo lo que decís y quiero darte la razón, pero ahí estaríamos mal los dos.”

“You’re biased too,” Paco snapped. “How do we know you’re not just okay with it because he made you? He can take stuff out of your mind, who’s to say he can’t put things in? Did you ask?”

“Yes.” The answer was immediate. A little loud. A little tense.

“And did you ask any follow-up questions?” Paco pressed. Oli had to admire that question on its own. Cain wasn’t the type to do things out of the goodness of his heart—Oli hadn’t even been aware such people truly existed until recently, rare as they were, with only a sample size of two he had to go off of. Harri had to be aware that he was being used; just not *how*, quite yet. Either that, or Cain’s ‘help’ made itself appear far more benign than its malignant manipulation proved it to be.

“No tengo el tiempo ni las crayolas para seguir explicándote las cosas,” Harri snapped, stiff.

Ave’s ears twitched. Oli could hear it too, footsteps. With the way it favored one foot over the other, he was willing to bet it was Connie. He leaned over to bet with Ave on that.

Connie walked through the door too quickly for Oli to get even a single word in. “Sos un estúpido, ¿sabés?” he told Harri as a greeting.

He still looked like he was at the edge of sleep, his hair sticking up everywhere, still in his pajamas... he hadn’t even put on slippers, just socks. His feet must have been freezing.

Harri straightened up, eyes narrowed. Defensive. “Primero que nada, buenos días.”

The ‘good morning’ was not reciprocated. “You’re not denying it.”

“One typically doesn’t have to deny slanderous misinformation so false even a fool could see it’s a lie.”

“I think it’s up for debate,” Connie said, drawing out the sentence like he was reeling in a caught fish.

“My point still stands.”

Winnie was rolling her eyes. “What will you do? Kick Cain out too?”

“He hasn’t done anything!” Harri defended.

“Yet,” Paco amended.

“And he still did something to *you*, even if you don’t get it yet,” Winnie added.

“Oh! Oh! I know!” Connie rushed in, settling at the table with a malicious grin on his face. “He also tried to get Nando to commit actual murder yesterday, he told me.”

Ciro blinked. “We all wanted to kill Borja yesterday, what’s your point?”

“You’re defending him?” Paco questioned Ciro as Connie deflated.

“He’s defending himself,” Oli clarified for him. “If he’s in the wrong for wanting Borja dead we might have some serious culling to do. It’s a bad justification for a good thing.”

“He’s just being petty now,” Harri dismissed. “He gets riled up by Cain all the time and gets mad even though he does the same thing to everyone else.”

Connie pulled back as if hit, mouth open so Oli could watch his words die on his tongue.

“He does *not*,” Ciro defended. “Get those glasses checked. They can’t be more different. Connie knows what lines *are*. And he knows when one’s crossed.”

“Why push *Nando* to kill Borja?”

“Because he wanted to see what would happen,” Oli proposed, glancing out of the corner of his eye to the way Connie flinched at the words. *Deep* under his skin, then, to be affecting him like that when he wasn’t even there. “Isn’t that why he does everything?”

“Not always.”

Oli nearly choked on his own air. Ave flinched, standing up at attention at once. Paco flinched back instead, bumping on the counter. Connie froze. Winnie too, though her tail fluffed up noticeably. Ciro and Harri both turned to look.

Ciro scowled. Harri smiled.

Cain was leaning on the doorframe, not bothered by the early hour or the conversation he had interrupted. There, the slightest twitch of his lips — amusement. He wasn’t the wall of ice he’d like to present himself as, not completely. Not if Oli could recognize a tell. Unless that was something done to mess with him— no, he had to stop doing that, he had been Opportunist, not Paranoid.

“It’s rude to talk about someone who’s listening,” Cain announced.

“It’s rude to scramble someone’s memories,” Ciro shot back. Cain tilted his head. Oli winced.

Bad idea. Stooping to his level on the first interaction, not trying to salvage the situation, volunteering information... did nobody listen to Oli last time?

"It's *fine*," Harri admonished, and Cain glanced at him with an unsettling degree of precision in his eye tracking. His head righted itself like he just clicked together a little puzzle in his head, sizing Harri up— who met his eyes readily. "More than."

"There's nothing to it," Cain said, not in the tone of someone politely dismissing praise, but in the tone of a recommendation. "The world is only as painful as you allow it to be."

"Is that a challenge?"

Later, Oli would say that he didn't scramble to hold Ave back. It was impressive how fast the smaller man could sink down into a slinking position—and how readily he shook out of Oli's brace, like he hadn't succeeded in catching him at all. One moment he was sitting semi-uncomfortably like any regular of the household, the next he was a [rabbit? weasel?] in a human's body, nimble limbs and bared teeth.

In contrast, Oli froze when Cain's gaze focused on Ave, and on Oli's general direction. He tensed. Ready to do what, he didn't know.

Oli saw a shift in Cain's posture, not so much standing straight and bracing for impact as it was leaning forward, still not in challenge, but in anticipation— were his eyes dilated?

Not good. If he was anticipating the attack then Ave would be at a disadvantage from the get go. They'd both been witness to the methods he took to subdue a physical force. Oli reached to grab Ave by the scruff, but he'd ducked away in the opposite direction, feet weaving patterns on the floor like a dancer, single-minded in his advance.

Ave was yanked back to his seat by someone that was not Oli, from an angle he wasn't in.

Harri gave him a curt nod, for preventing Ave from hurting Cain. Oli nodded back to Harri, for preventing Cain from hurting Ave. An alliance of convenience.

Ave growled from somewhere deep in his throat. Oli reached over to bind him tighter, preventing him from tripping headfirst into a snare, tricked and trapped by a wire around his neck, choking him out with blood that gurgled where only sound did for the time being.

Harri spoke up, straining and tired all at once, "Cain, just... just go."

"No, release him, it'll be funny." Winnie was leaning in.

"*Super* funny," Connie agreed.

"I would prefer if you got my other hand, this time," Cain told Ave, looking down on him patiently as if he'd paused of his own volition, as if no one else was in the room. He held his unbandaged hand up for appraisal, closer to Ave's mouth than any sane man should. Oli *had* to wonder. Putting too much trust in Oli and Harri? Or just gloating, unwisely, for the sake of it? "It would be a shame to see Harri's efforts go to waste on ruined bandages."

Oli flinched back from Ave, disentangling. Had he forgotten to lock his door the entire time?

“Cain, *get out.*” Harri repeated, louder. More urgent. To him, Ave was the threat. The one thing he and Oli could agree on was that Cain was being beyond reckless. If it weren’t for the trap and the utter chaos that would bring to the power structure, Oli was tempted to let it happen.

Cain regarded Ave another moment longer. He glanced, briefly, to Oli. Oli chose not to think of anything, to present nothing of interest in his expression, to bind his thread to his own soul and no one else’s. He crossed strands and stitches and fibres across himself like arms, but less revealing, still, for there was no posture in that which could not be seen unless it wished to be. To turn himself inward and away, away from those that sought to know him. They would know nothing. Nothing but for his sheer focus on *not* volunteering a scrap of information about himself. *Certainly* not to Cain. Who then turned to Harri, nodded politely, and stepped backwards out of the room without turning to look where he was going.

Ave slumped, defeated, the moment his opponent turned the corner.

“Poison,” Paco said, quietly. “Lingers long after you’ve washed the blood out.”

Ave glanced to Paco, ears pricked, a certain sheen in his eyes.

Quiet had wings.

That's what he reaffirmed that morning. He had wings.

He knew, because sometime while he slept, they'd unfolded from where he'd pressed them in flush to his back, out of sight like a dirty secret and its absence so readily mirroring a curdling emptiness in his chest. He knew, because sometime while he slept, they'd wrapped themselves around him and the ones he wanted to keep, covering them in stardust and inky-black trails of dreaming dark softer than the open air. He knew, because when he opened his eyes, he was warm and at peace, and the sun did not burn his skin to blisters and bloodshed; because his flight feathers cut away at its beams and made everything shady and cool.

He knew, because he was home.

He had wings, and he was home. His wings.

Folding them in, pressing them out of the space he was meant to inhabit, had felt like denying the universe; like he was pressing not just the world back onto his shoulders, but the weight of the trillions of lives he'd led to oblivion in his failure to fulfill the purpose of his creation. His wings, he knew the moment he lost them again, were the only organic part of him; all the rest was automaton, weapon, object and instrument. A failed tool in all the wrong shapes.

He felt his own down feathers and wanted to cry for it, cry for how right it felt and for the brief hours he was not himself after just beginning to learn what that might mean. But he did

not, he did not. Because as he felt them, some of the feathers were misaligned, tender, like they'd been folded wrong. And something like an instinct took hold of him, a latent understanding of how to handle them.

He needed a mirror.

He wanted to see them.

He wanted to fix himself up, and look nice. Look beautiful, feel pretty, stand graceful for a change; be ready to fly.

Even if he couldn't. Someday. Maybe.

He was still growing.

Slowly, carefully, he withdrew his wings from over Grace and Nando both. Tried to lift himself up without waking the dead; the living, he knew, did not tend to wake if he was gentle. That ended up being more difficult than he thought. His body protested with every twitch, burning, and Quiet choked on a scream as he went back down, instinctually trying to curl up into a ball.

He froze when he felt Nando trying to move. Surely, he'd wake, if not for their attempt to rise then from the way they couldn't look away. Anticipating something, they didn't know what. Coal black eyes opening, perhaps. A deeper breath that meant he'd gone back to sleep, perhaps.

Perhaps, neither. A new something entirely. Once upon a time, the Decider was the one who came up with new things. But it was only fair to let someone else have a go at surprising them. Perhaps one thing, perhaps another.

Perhaps not: fingers running through his hair. Unexpected, far from anticipated, but he wasn't scared, for once. He knew that shape, knew the way they moved. Tenderly. Slowly, like their owner was dreaming. He sank back down, relishing in the feeling.

It was a light brushing, repetitive in its motions, falling into the step of a simple pattern. The movement was lazy, but not imprecise, just slow in the way sleepy things tended to be, tended to coax others into their patterns. Fingers brushed through hair at the root, running down and through, breaking off at the end to return to origin and smooth what was ruffled back into place. Once, twice. And brushed again. One step, two step, following a circadian rhythm. Brushing with the grain, smooth and soft and delicate. Gradually, incrementally, progressing around from the front of their head to the back. Brush, brush, brush.

His breathing slowed, deepening. His body felt weighted down in place, relaxing into the soft fabric around him; it pushed inward, bent to and accommodated his shape, curling comfortably around him. As he slowed, so too did the brushing, fingers settling in place and caressing aimlessly at his scalp. No need to rush.

He was safe there.

He was even starting to believe it. There, with them, within those walls.

With how deeply Grace was breathing, she felt that too. He could feel her presence still, if not by her breathing then by her thread. Cool and comfortable, air light around him, a balm on weathered skin.

A surprise through and through, that one. A pleasant one. Quiet was never sure, entirely, if he liked surprises. He liked predictability; when he knew what was coming, how to prepare for it, what decisions could and should be made. Though sometimes he found the patterns unfortunate, conflict cycling on, a wheel he wished wouldn't turn. But when the wheel suddenly switched direction, or spun faster than he could keep up with, no, he didn't like the surprise of it.

A smaller wheel, though, one that didn't run him over or spin him at a circumference vaster than he could measure. The occasional surprise didn't hurt, then. A turn, a spin.

Now that he was looking, Grace's hair *did* turn, in circles, in every which way. Round and round and round it went. Spinning in repetition, but chaotic in pattern. She had a good balance. Just the right dash of surprising.

Even her thread twisted down and down her arm, where her hand came to rest just where her heart, her injury, had been. It laid flat on her chest, unbothered.

Morbidly, he was reminded of the way she looked when he killed her; how he thought she looked comfortable with the way she was laying, the delicate curls of her hair and her hand posed not dissimilarly near her chest. So comfortable he had half the mind to join her in eternal sleep.

Laying next to her was just natural. *Being* with her just felt *right*. But no, she looked far more relaxed like this; he *preferred* her like this. How remarkable that she was comfortable enough near him, despite what he'd done, to rest so easily beside him. He couldn't believe her, sometimes. Couldn't believe what he did could be forgiven. Her other hand almost touched his.

It was like a halfway point between her spectral form and the one when she shared her body with him. For a moment, he wondered if she wanted to... he could get healed immediately, it didn't have to be fatal...

No, he reminded himself. Whatever had happened with the Dragon had been brought by the beginning of another chapter. And there wouldn't be another chapter. Never again.

Never again. Between the cool air he was breathing in steadily and the warm hands scritchingly softly at his scalp and the heaviness settling into his limbs and his eyes, he might've believed it.

He could believe it. He could close his eyes; he would, even. He did. They stayed closed.

When he opened them again, nothing had changed. He was still there, them with him. But his wings itched, curled around them, feathers displaced and neglected. With greater reluctance,

he tried again to rise from the nest.

His limbs were sore, still burning, but better rested. He could make it out on limbs that only trembled slightly; could stand well enough, on his own, to find a mirror. To see. To, if he would indulge himself a moment, preen.

By the time they made it to their bathroom, the thought was unavoidable.

He never did like it when he thought like that; when he wanted to see how *handsome* he might look in the Mirror; the Mirror, the one that took his Voices from him, that he wished he could shatter; the Mirror, the one *He* apparently lived within, who he wished he could save.

He was not hiding behind their reflection, this time. Was that a reassurance?

The Echo, *She'd* called Him, but that was not His name. Quiet named Him the Narrator. His job, and the closest thing he'd ever known Him as.

Later, after the end and the beginning of everything, they'd thought of another name to refer Him as.

Slowly, carefully, he set out to smoothen those feathers so he could get back to sleep. More than once he lost his focus, staring at the patterns that seemed to happen continuously *in* his wings. So many colors. So many stars.

And at some point in his spine where the feathers got smaller and softer, himself. Not scary anymore, he hoped, not hard to look at.

It was funny. When he felt those new yet old limbs around him, he wanted Him to know. He wanted to tell his father that his wings had grown in. He looked better in the mirror. He was —

His eyes were glowing.

Was it like that for Him? Did He stand, in the heart of the woods, clutching a blade, did he glow and glow and glow? Did His form, too, slip through fingertips, flesh hiding crystal bones? Did He, too, have no-one to turn to, like when Quiet had first woken up?

Maybe He didn't. Maybe that was why he was made.

What did He make of him? The curve of his wings, the beat of his heart, the curl of his hair, what shape did He form of that half-mortal body? How did He fashion Himself a weapon to be held by the throat?

He made the fuse so short, fed by recalcitrant sparks that crackled and popped at its edge for the blaze of glory; a weapon forged in the shadow of His death, that wanted to be used.

He made the trigger so sensitive, jumping at the slightest movement, prepared to point and shoot at any indication of danger there could ever be; a tool that feared like He did, that shivered and itched in His hold.

It didn't quite work, so He took it apart, fixed it, put it back together.

He made the tongue so smooth-slick, able to squirm and shift to fit the mold as needed, able to adapt with the cunning of only the most sociable of beasts; a tool for many uses, He envisioned a lockpick to overlook the keys.

He made the reflexes so sharp, to dodge and duck and weave and flinch, to see with the skin and hear with the muscle; a living machine He trained to stay alive or to die trying.

Took it apart, fixed it, put it back together.

He made the will so brittle, so desperately aware of its own fragility that it would bend the knee before it broke; an instrument, made for its obedience, made for a destiny He foretold.

He made the selfishness so great, brimming with desire that burned through it until nothing else remained but the yearning for beautiful things; for things He would not provide it, and for things it was not allowed, but things it would go to great lengths to grasp.

Took it apart, put it back together.

He made the spite so cutting, like cracking whips and whirling winds that tore the world asunder for the sin of its manifestations; to seek retribution for Him and the failings of its systems He died to correct.

He made the mind too wandering, overeager in thirst for knowledge so it would never stay on the track it was led to walk; to know, to understand, to learn from Him the stakes and the worlds out there to save.

He made the temper so irreverent, so uncaring to the natural ways or tradition or honor; to live and love living, to abhor the stillness of the oblivion and the incomprehensibility of the chaos to come.

Took it apart, then put it back.

He made the gaze so gelid, so unlike anything of Creation before or after Him, so alien to Life so it would not blink at its taking; so it would not care, or think, or be but what it knew.

He made the heart so big, so inherent, so moral to His cause; so the world would have a savior, and a savior it would want to be.

And then, he put it back together.

Except the pieces worked just fine without what stirred them to consciousness.

He wouldn't let his people drown again, if it came down to it. He had drowned once, he would gladly take up that fate if it meant they got to live.

The Narrator did well in not giving a name to refer to Himself as. Because Quiet would have looked. Forgive him, he would.

Sometimes, he wondered, did He have children? Did He have people who shared the shape of his face, the color of his hair, whatever it might have been? Were they still around? Had He been proud of them? Had He been proud of him?

Every time, he went back to reality. What was there to be proud of?

He couldn't endure. He couldn't bear staying in amber. He was made for one purpose, but ultimately couldn't do it. A failed creation. A failed Creation.

I am what you made me. He told no one. *I don't know how to undo it.*

Could He reach into the marrow of him and knit him anew? Could He make of him something whole, something alive?

Would He have ~~loved~~ cared for him, if he was made right?

Quiet was hoping he could sneak his way back to the room without much trouble; preserve what silence remained of the morning, linger before the day's start that much longer. Of all the people they could've run into on their way back, at least Cain had the lowest chance of causing a scene, he supposed.

That Quiet nearly tripped when he turned the corner was unrelated. He just never expected to see him, and whenever he did, he never expected him to be as close as he was when he did. Cain never appeared in the distance. He was always, at minimum, close enough that Quiet had to question his spatial awareness and how he hadn't seen the scare coming.

As routine had it, Cain greeted Quiet politely *after* he got his heartrate in check. He glanced at the space just over their shoulders and they made a conscious effort to conceal just how pleased they were to still be noticed. "I see we've chosen to present as ourselves again."

Too early in the morning for that. "Come again?"

"You were concealing your wings last night," Cain commented. "And now you've clearly seen fit to stop that."

Quiet stretched, adjusting the weight at his shoulders. "It wasn't a comfortable experience, folding them in like I was, no."

He neglected to mention he had no clue how or why they'd unfolded last night. It didn't feel like particularly noteworthy information now that his wings *were* out, did it? Now that he'd seen them?

"Good," Cain said. Quiet blinked. Cain didn't. "You shouldn't keep any bad habits from your visits to that other place. Best to leave it behind."

"Easy for *you* to do," Quiet huffed.

Cain tilted his head, just slightly. If he wore the right expression, he'd look passively confused. As he was, he looked like he was waiting for something.

The conversation lulled a moment, then, and Quiet wondered if he could just brush past Cain and end it there. Cain wouldn't mind. He didn't tend to mind anything. But then he spoke up. "At the end of the day, we can get rid of anyone if they're too bothersome to deal with. There's no need to let them take up space when they aren't even here."

"When you say 'get rid of,' what do you...?" Quiet knew, really, but he didn't understand why it was being brought up. Cain didn't think much of murder, it was valued as if it were any other everyday action to him, but Quiet still considered it a nuclear option—or, at least, a decision not taken lightly.

He wasn't going to kill someone for inconveniencing him. And at the end of the day... wasn't that all that really happened? And now he was here. And now he was safe. And now he was home.

"Does it need further explanation?" Cain asked, and Quiet fought off the urge to squirm. They knew Cain didn't like overexplaining himself, or talking in circles... maybe he shouldn't have asked at all. "You don't need to keep putting on the pathetic act. We've killed without hesitation. We could kill without effort."

"I'm not the same as before. And the one time I killed without thinking, I did all I could to make it up to her," Quiet answered. He knew Cain didn't care for any defenses of his moral character, but he had to acknowledge it. A possibility, strange though it may seem, sprouted in his mind. "Did you forget?"

There was a prickling sensation. Something...

(Passivity) No. But you did.

...like a shiver, passed through Quiet. A familiar weight in his hand; his fist clenched around it, but when he looked, he wasn't holding anything.

"It's interesting, to choose to care. To let all of it in, to experience the full range of what this new setting has to offer." Cain took a step forward—a fast one, not slow or for preamble, but an intentional gesture of approach. Quiet took it for what it was, in the place of an outstretched hand. "But anytime. You could just make it all stop. We aren't beholden to consequences like the rest of them are."

Quiet shook his head. Further words did not come.

"It's good to savor what you have, before it gets stale," Cain said. His voice sounded lower in volume. It wasn't a whisper, though. Just quieter, like it was just for him. "That's what we're doing, then. We can indulge in some pretend suffering."

He was looking down the drop of a cliff. In the depths of an abyss. An empire of... what did he call it? What did he say? 'Pretend?' He had lived through it. Quiet had wanted death, would have done anything to stop. He had not pretended. He didn't know how to pretend.

And yet further words did not come.

“We’re special, Decider,” Cain said, tilting his head farther, almost a 45 degree angle now. “And we’re here forever. Those wings of ours aren’t made to wither.”

Quiet did wither. He watched himself shrivel away into nothing, in that mirror that stole his voices away. He died and rebirthed, but being reborn did not make the death any lesser, did not make his losses hurt any less.

His wings did wither. He watched as they unspooled into threads and uncountable shapes. He watched. He could do nothing but watch.

He withered. He wasn’t special. His Voices were the special ones; he didn’t last without them. He was just a body. He went to grasp his thread, such words failing him, and a shock of ice locked him in that position. A world of bodies fell away, unimportant and unrecognized, as the vessel containing his consciousness locked, momentarily, in place.

Words could not come through a mouth that wasn’t truly his.

But he had another pathway to connect to Cain, one worn by disuse and unfamiliar—yet he found it readily, much closer to him than he anticipated, and poured himself into it like an open tap.

(Recollection) Forever is a long time. You saw it too.

He wasn’t sure what the others had seen of the mishmash of memories in his head, regarding Fury. But he felt overwhelmingly in control of his words, his thoughts, in this moment.

(Reminder) Nothing lasts forever. Even I couldn’t.

Not without them. Not for real. There was no ‘pretending,’ what was he going on about?

“We do. We did. And we will,” Cain said. He felt the words in his head. It felt like insulation and foam, like something weightless despite its immense volume. He couldn’t hear clearly, beyond that voice. That low, dull voice. Something behind Quiet’s eyes cracked like frustration, and he felt his vision seep through it like blood did scratches and cuts.

(Denial) That was torture. I wanted it to end.

“Did you?”

What? “Yes!” Quiet managed, breathless and wheezing, exhausted by exasperation.

“Do you still?” Cain asked, and Quiet found himself choked again. Couldn’t. “No. Because it’s already over. It’s been over for so long it isn’t even worth thinking about, except to reminisce on the feeling. She made us feel... something. And then she faded, and it did too, and it was just us again. None of it really mattered.”

He tried to speak against the tightening of his throat. Because it had been more than that, it had mattered, it had taken Hero away, had taken Stubborn away, and he didn’t want to recall the hollow emptiness where the weight of their presences had once been. He didn’t want to

cry in front of him, but as he struggled vainly against nothing at all he found he didn't have much of an urge.

"Nothing mattered because nothing happened, we moved on once we were done getting everything we could out of it. We decided to persist to see what would happen. If we ever got bored of her routine, we both know we could have ended her the instant we thought of it."

He shook his head. The motion was slow and clumsy with the pressure in his skull. He couldn't end her. He couldn't stop the pain. Stubborn and Hero had died quietly and he had heard them.

(Guilt) Was it my fault?

(Boredom) No.

They made their choices to leave when they did.

It's not our fault that we're stronger than everyone else.

Quiet... it was quiet. He was leaning, a little, into the closest wall. Cain stood idly, not so close he was invading his personal space, not far enough away for Quiet to feel wholly comfortable.

Cain did not offer anything. Quiet didn't know why he thought he would. And yet his thread hummed with the thoughts he didn't want, anyway. With words he was losing the meaning of with how often he repeated them.

(Remorse) I'm sorry. I didn't want to kill them.

(Cold) No. We're not sorry. And we're not going to start doing that.

Quiet tried to glance away. He didn't mean to annoy him, he should stop bothering Cain with things, things that didn't matter, things he wasn't capable of caring about. But he found he couldn't muster the energy to turn far, let alone stand up and walk off. His wings weighed behind him, drooping low, the longest of his flight feathers dragging on the floor.

It didn't seem fair to be tired already. Quiet was barely awake, it wasn't even really morning yet. But Cain didn't mind, just recaught his attention, brushed a hand like ice against his shoulder and asked Quiet to look at him. He was trying.

"Good," Cain praised, when Quiet fixed his eye contact. His black eyes tracked to unsettling precision, moving up as Quiet's posture straightened from the affirmation. It felt like progress, though its direction was unclear.

(Cold) We've all been killed before. It's all the same from one life to the next.

We don't have to kill them again if we don't want to.

(Resolve) No. Never.

(Satisfaction) That's that, then.

Cain took a step back. His footstep didn't make a sound, or Quiet must not have paid enough attention in time to hear it.

It didn't matter.

He needed to get back to the room, do what he was doing before Cain's interruption. Sleep some more. He stood straight, pins and needles running through his legs, as if his whole body had fallen asleep for some time, or as if he'd spent too long outside in the cold. The stimulus reignited his nerves, though the burning itching throughout him had been mitigated by a subtle numbing... oh.

...Was he supposed to thank Cain? He figured it would be polite.

Of course.

Grace had not been able to get Damiana to stay still until the apple strudel was in the oven under Paco's watchful gaze. Delicious smell aside, they hadn't really talked about what happened in the last route or anything like that.

At least the smell had dragged Ava away from whoever and whatever she was doing — she knew the answer to both, but had to pretend for her own sanity. She had regained most of her energy back, at the very least.

Now all she had to do was to drag them somewhere private. Even if the promise of food made it unlikely for it to work. Some members of the flock were watching the oven as if willing it to burn faster, others looking at the clock. Patience seemed in short supply when baked goods were involved.

Girl talk didn't, necessarily, have to be private. And she didn't want Winnie to move anymore than she absolutely had to. She looked like she needed more rest. The shadows under her eyes looked like bruises.

At least Tabitha was looking better, or as better as could have been expected after some actual rest. It was impressive how similar to Damiana she looked, with her eyes wide open like they were. Still not quite processing, then. Well, that was why she was there.

Not that Dami herself was better. If anything, having a secondhand account to everything that happened might have left her faring worse. The emotional bleedthrough had been bad enough with context. The more time they spent there, the less she resembled her idealized version, the Damsel.

She wondered where to start.

Hesitation was not encouraged behavior.

Quiet waited, for Grace. She thought maybe she was the only one he was able to do that for. She'd seen the way he tensed at her approach; she wasn't sure what split-second decision he'd

opted out of then, to hurt her again or to protect himself, but he'd most certainly chosen to wait.

Grace didn't think hesitation was a good choice, any other time.

Not with what she'd seen. Not with how Quiet spoke of it. Not with how Nando tensed back from his own moderate suggestions.

Hesitation, waiting, a pause in violent momentum; it had absolved the both of them of their violent pasts. Between them, a quiet moment shared between two time-traveled souls. Silence was a thing meant for times of peace, rest; tranquility was a privilege offered to those who weren't worried about survival.

The rest of them in that house, she assumed, were the results of hesitation in situations it could not be afforded. Shards of glass hardened into black obsidian by unsurmountable pressure, sharpened into blades by repetitive strikes against brimstone in personalized hells. Forged into improvised weapons by that which they were used on. Cutting words to keep the score, so they could never again be caught by surprise; pricked ears to know when danger's near, so prey could flee from predator's jaws; piercing stares that saw through everything, past the curled coils of death's gloved embrace. Improvised dances and evolutionary adaptations. Instincts overturned and overcharged to fight for their survival at a moment's notice. They *had to*, Grace knew. She didn't and she paid the price.

But there were prices to be paid, now, by *not hesitating*.

Grace had been there, to watch Oli work; to watch the room's shadows cut in deeper as a man who believed he had all the answers tuned out appeals to his good reason, impatient to act. She'd watched as Oli delayed, pretended, delayed. The lies he told the apparition, the lies he told himself. Had watched the shadows slink off the walls and out the door. Had watched as Oli pressed his back to the wall like a ritual, teeth sharp and eyes sharper than the blade at his throat, and delayed, pretended, delayed. Like instinct. Like it was what he was forged for. Had watched as Oli slinked away and stayed away still.

She was closer to Quiet. She could feel the locks clicking into place, sense the loneliness on the other side of the door.

The shadowed apparition did not hesitate. It would consume them if not suppressed. It was a familiar threat with familiar modes of address.

Tabi did not hesitate. She pushed Oli back behind his doors; and herself into her own. Drew lines and boundaries already assuming them to be crossed.

Quiet needed silence. To linger. To wait. Some time, any time at all, could be afforded to their benefit. This morning was still, but not still enough. They'd stirred in their sleep. They did not rest properly. Grace could *feel* it, the fragility, still; the glass was worn thin, would shatter at the slightest sound or provocation.

She doesn't think any of them would ever hit Quiet, not normally, but if it *were* to happen...

'Rules were learned by *experience*.' It happens once, it could happen again. Any of the boys, any of the girls, anyone could lash out; and Quiet would just accept that as the nature of reality. Account for it. Consider escalation; even a raised voice could be a move towards worse hostilities. 'Action and reaction.'

Hesitation, not hesitation, where in that binary choice did 'talking' fall? Where was 'we need to talk' there? A lull in hostilities didn't mean they wouldn't start again. They needed to clarify things in that lull.

Tabi broke the silence, reaching for pen and paper. Grace, privately, still marveled at the way she was stared at. She *liked* the change. "How does it feel?"

"How does what feel?" she asked back, because she could feel something beating that wasn't her heart, could make imprints in the world itself, could remind it she was there and not just the remains of a soul.

"Your new thread."

That, to Grace, was simple. Warmth. Life. Companionship. She doubted Tabi would understand if she explained. Tabi was more down-to-earth than her. "How did it feel like to you?"

"I asked first."

"I asked second."

Ava rolled her eyes as she came into view from the hallway, Gonchi behind her. "Like heat. Happy?"

Tabi snapped to attention. "You *felt* your— Gonchi's thread?"

"Yeah," Ava said, opening the fridge and scavenging in it as if she owned it. She had to lean down to peer into the shelves, pulling out and leaning back with a bottle of orange juice in hand. "Did you not? It was hard *not* to notice, he ran hot when he wanted to."

"He's very passionate," Dami added, more animated than before. "Like molten lava, shot straight through the veins! Burning and rippling and alive!"

That was concerning. Given the way Tabi's eyebrows furrowed, Grace was willing to bet she felt the same. It seemed all of them felt something different.

"I didn't notice," Tabi said, tone lower. She straightened once Dami's expression shifted into something less lively and curious, more subdued and concerned, gesturing with open palms. "What I mean is: I didn't feel anything, not as intense as you two are getting at. I just felt like myself; a little sharper around the edges, more grounded. I walked in that house and still felt like myself. Like whatever tides were pushing me around before had been stilled, silenced. Anchored against."

"Of course you didn't," Harri commented from the couch way over there, nose in a book. "I wouldn't want to change anything about you."

A brief pause. Tabi glanced to Dami, then shifted so she could fix a harsh glare to Harri more directly. He looked up. “Not that we *are* capable of— I meant, I didn’t want to influence you with how I was thinking. Or feeling.”

“That wasn’t how I felt at all,” Winnie murmured, head leaning heavily on her palm.

“So,” Tabi said, leaning forward, “it’s time you answered my question. How does *your* thread feel, Grace?”

“I could show you,” Grace said impulsively.

“Show me how?”

“Same way Harri did,” Grace said, rising from her seat fluidly as her feet left the ground. She floated breezily, making a wide circle around Tabi. Her shoulders raised. She heard shuffling from the room as Harri stood, rising to accompany the rest of the group.

“No,” was the only thing he said.

“Are you asking to *possess* me?” Tabi asked. There was something to her tone, a curiosity, a certain lightness to her step as she turned to watch Grace make her rounds. Not close enough to chill her yet; Grace preferred a more concrete invitation. Harri shook his head at her.

“That’s a special favor for special people,” Grace clarified. “No. Body-sharing isn’t remotely like this. And your husband doesn’t like to watch.”

She didn’t know Tabi could stutter, eyes darting here and there. Harri stopped moving, a bit too still to be normal. A bit too tense, brows a bit too knit. Like he wanted to say something.

“You’d be able to explain it better than the rest,” Tabi started, trying to regain her composure. “How it’s different; not just from sharing a body, but from what it’s like to be *us*, to not have threads at all.”

“Touching a thread isn’t even close to having one yourself,” Grace agreed easily. “It’s like hearing something through a speaker versus hearing something in your head. One is external and muffled by interference, and the other bubbles up clear as day from inside you.”

“And body-sharing...?” Tabi prompted.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Harri interrupted. “Whatever Grace is and how she functions doesn’t concern us.”

“Excuse me?”

Grace might not have a functioning heart anymore, but she could feel a pulse in her ears all the same. Pins and needles in her arms, all the same.

Harri looked at the room for backup and found none.

“I’m not a ‘what.’ I’m a person,” Grace insisted. That shouldn’t even need clarifying. Tabi was looking at him like she was trying to complete the puzzle of his thoughts.

“She’s an outlier,” Harri told Tabi. “Her... ‘ghost’ qualities only prompt further questions, with no answers.”

Grace felt something in her tighten. Was he trying to *say* something with that? She floated away from Tabi, in his direction, and he took a step back in reaction to the dropping temperature of the air. His mouth pressed into a thin line, studying her movement.

Scared of a little old ghost, was he? Or scared of the unknown. She twirled off from them both in the air, defying gravity and the laws of life and death, cutting Harri a glare as she distanced herself. She didn’t have ‘answers’ on what or how she was; things just happened to her. This latest one was a good thing. She didn’t need to explain it to justify that to herself.

“I didn’t know you planned your moves that far ahead,” Tabi told Gonchi too casually. Wanting to change the topic so badly?

“I had to dream something up so I wouldn’t actually do what I wanted.” Grace could almost see smoke pouring from Gonchi’s mouth, dark grey and blistering.

“You had some good ideas.” Ciro was grinning wide, some of that windswept madness Grace had felt secondhand present in his eyes. “If only.”

Grace felt it too, if secondhand once more. A bell ringing in time with his thoughts. Mob mentality, being swept on the emotions of others like leaves on wind. It would be so easy, so easy, so easy.

“Thelka nothing,” Winnie scoffed, looking for all in the world like she had been swallowing up her opinion. “What the hell was up with those two?”

Dami averted her eyes. Under Grace’s watchful gaze, she almost glowed, for a moment, flames dancing upon her skin. She felt her lips twitch in approval.

“The big one was still with an agenda,” Tabi inspected her nails before her gaze went to the rapidly-browning strudel, “Even if his methods could have been less...”

“Less...?”

“Intrusive.” Tabi selected the word with a surgeon’s precision. “He gave himself up with the collateral, lucky us. His rhetoric is easy enough to debunk by holding it up to itself, as long as you have the strength to hold it at all. He picked an easy target in Quiet. A harder target in the rest of us.”

“‘Us?’” came, unsurprisingly, from Paco. “We were the ones who had to deal with him!”

“Don’t talk to her that way, she’s just telling the truth,” Harri jumped up at once.

“I’m offering *help*,” Tabi said.

“You’re trying to *budge in* on us, get in our heads, manipulate us somehow. Drive wedges between us. You don’t get to call yourself— I *knew* it was a mistake letting you near us,” Paco hissed. “You’re *outsiders*. Not part of us! I—”

Paco glanced to where Ave and Ciro were, for support. Ciro’s disapproval was self-evident from his dull, tired expression; the set of his face and shape of his frown. Ave wasn’t even looking at him, overly concerned with the state of Winnie. Paco tensed.

“Why are you *so* on-edge, lately?” Harri asked in monotone, recatching his attention. Harri held up his hands in a placating gesture, movement stiff and shoulders hiked. “Fine. You can have your opinions on other matters. But Tabi and the others have *only* proven themselves helpful to us.”

Dami went to open the oven door, to check on the pastry. “I want everyone to be okay. That includes Quiet and you.”

“Why would we want to go back where we got our minds wiped?” Tabi asked in turn.

“You didn’t say anything when you realized I was possessing Quiet.” Grace finished. “Nor when I got my thread.”

At his core, Paco wanted to protect, same as most of the others, she was reasonably sure.

How could Quiet ever think they would abandon him? It was clear as day in the way they talked about him. They loved him.

In that single thing, in Grace’s opinion, all the boys were alike, chasing after that implicit approval and the subtle pride in the expressions on Quiet’s face. Wanting his approval more than almost anything else, and yet so reluctant to voice that out loud.

She wondered how many of them knew they’d always have it. Even after he had said it outright.

“You made good shields too. That was very brave.” Dami noted, eyes roaming. Looking for someone. “I didn’t know Thelka could be so...”

“You’re welcome,” Paco cut her off. “I’m not sure if I would’ve done it without Oleander’s help, though.”

Dami nodded enthusiastically. “You two were great!” She then turned to her sister. “Did you apologize yet?”

“Yes.”

“With words?”

More silence.

“Tabi, you know knives make people really scared,” Dami said softly, holding onto her sister’s shoulder for support as she chided her. “At least you should apologize for that! In

person too, it's more genuine that way."

"What should we do about the lovesick one?"

Dami went quiet at once, fussing over the oven to no real effect.

"He's never setting foot here nor anywhere near Dami if we can help it," Ciro said at once. "I already finished dumping all his stuff, that should be a clear enough message."

"He knows we're staying here—"

"Does he? We never told him. Still, he's not getting anywhere near here after..." a shudder.

Grace was there for it; she overlapped with Quiet, and so everything directed towards him had to first pass through her. It was horrendous. Crushing in its strength, and pulling in its magnitude; like they were being torn open, him and her as an unknown collateral caught in the crossfire, ripped apart and shred to pieces all at once.

She imagined the others had to have been luckier. That didn't make it any more bearable, she knew. She'd never been *hated* before. Not like that.

"Wretched..."

Winnie swayed where she sat, flowers blooming from capillaries and branching out in vines and brambles from her skin. She moved as if to stand, then stumbled and stayed where she was as if succumbing to roots. "Wretched things." Ave leaned forward.

"What *was* that?" Tabi asked as Grace tried to wash the memory off. It itched. She didn't even have real skin *to* itch. "What did he... *do*?"

"Got fucking pissed," Ciro said. "And made it our problem. Bastard."

"No, we felt you guys get angry all at once and whatever he did was nothing like it."

"Because you weren't the target," Ciro said, almost kindly. He took a breath to say something else, but he got distracted.

Winnie had started clawing at her skin with ferocity, breathing becoming ragged as she slumped, slipping out of the chair. She would have fallen if Ave didn't cross the room in a single breath in order to catch her, even if she did send him to the floor non-too-gracefully.

She landed with a light *thump*, a sound lighter than Grace thought the sound of a falling body ought to make. She looked light; small, frail to an extent, through with the way her fingers tensed and twitched and her sharpened nails raked at the buds on her too-pale skin, Grace assumed she still wasn't keen on being seen as fragile despite her state.

But she was bleeding. Every scrape against the garden inside her dragged out roots that broke the skin as they pulled and tore against it. The tips of her fingers were coated in a film of red, coagulating beneath her nails.

It poured out of her like water, more blood than bodies were meant to contain. Ave lightly grabbed her wrists, pulling them back to stop her from hurting herself.

Winnie raised her head. Her eyes were foggy, unfocused, pupils blown wide. "Who?" she slurred.

"It's me, Ave."

"Hn, 've. Id'nfeels'ell." She let her head drop as small flowers began to force themselves out of the skin of her scalp. She'd been flowering for a while. Grace knew it. But she never thought of what could happen if things got worse. If her emotions got the better of her.

Dami gasped. It was a horrid sound; not pretty in the slightest, harsh and ugly, uneven and jagged at the edges. Her hands flew to her face, eyes huge and brimming with tears that caught the light and shimmered with reflections of sparks and embers.

"Get it out." She hadn't yet heard Ave sound so urgent. "Before it consumes you."

The flowers pushed themselves out, root and all, as Winnie went feverish with effort. She hoped it was her doing that, trying to resist the power making her into a flowerbed. It was already working on the ones ill-formed.

She watched Harri move to help her with that, pulling the others to the root. It was mechanical, like a tranquilizer, like an anesthetic drug.

The wounds of a deviation that could have become the future were latent. But she was trying to let him see that it didn't hurt. Maybe it didn't hurt anymore. The latent wounds may have at some point gone numb, and Grace hoped she felt nothing.

Dami, to Grace's surprise, approached the bleeding girl. She walked light, like Winnie was a precious thing, like she were being careful of her steps in a meadow. She hovered over her, hands clasped together to stop them from shaking, tears carving rivulets down her face. She shook her head feverishly.

"Move aside," Dami said forcefully, and Harri barely paused in his frantic work to glance at her. "Please."

He did, scooting over to give Dami room, and she crouched down to Winnie's level. Anxiously, delicate fingers moved to pluck at Winnie's arm, and embers caught kindling. Where she plucked, her hands left burn marks—but the skin did not break, would not bleed.

Winnie choked in her own screams.

"I'm sorry," Dami whispered as she worked, with each touch, as light and as fleeting as possible. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

It was a mantra. For stability. For comfort.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm *so* sorry..."

It was a prayer. For grace. For forgiveness. Even if Winnie couldn't hear her, having surrendered to unconsciousness. Grace had never seen Winnie rest around more than two or three people before, and that was when she was still awake. And now here she was, passed out in the middle of the floor among too many people to name. If only it were a willing change.

"Wake up." Ciro was so pale she half thought he'd pass out next. "I didn't mean it, I didn't mean it..."

Harri continued his mechanical work, nodding along; Dami's apologies took on a steady rhythm, a grief-stricken white noise he was drowning his thoughts in. "Smart play. We have to stop the bleeding somehow. We've got it under control, it's just a matter of finishing the job now."

Steady going, until it wasn't.

"The roots," Paco said, breathing too light to project his words. "The roots, they're... they're trying to take her."

"What are you talking about?" Tabi hovered anxiously, trying to find a way to help.

Paco had become helpless, paralyzed with fear. "It's all around us. Closing in. It wants us *all*."

"What's 'it'?"

"Look, can't you see it? Through the walls. The roots— no, threads. Not like ours. Wrong." He became more and more distressed.

"Stop talking like that," Harri chided, then leaned to Dami. "Ignore him, he's talking nonsense. We need to focus. One thing at a time now, don't slow down."

She kept stopping the bleeding, apologizing to dead air. The air stunk of smoke and burnt flesh—mixed, noxiously, with something like incense from incinerated herbs, and the faintest floral scent beneath it all, trying to break through. It made Grace feel sick.

Ava was clenching and unclenching her first, her tremendous strength for once useless. Gonchi stood nearby, clearly aching to help-- but what if his healing spread to the plantlife as well?

"Will she be okay?"

"Don't think about that right now," Ave forced out. "Focus on *making* her be okay. Gonchi, you have the longest legs here— get something to cover the wounds."

"I'll get it." Ava said, instead, rushing out of the room.

It was a steady process. It was agonizingly slow-going. Winnie wasn't waking up, Ciro had become a statue, Paco was still shivering. Dami's voice, which Grace had never imagined

could be damaged, was scratchy at the edges and worn from the exhaustion of constant use. Still, she kept apologizing; it had become automatic at some point. Whispered on exhale.

It was a while later that Ave, half crouched beside her, half slumping, tried to evaluate her vitals. Not even bothered he was staining his clothes with drying blood. A low murmur, “her heartbeat’s stable.”

“I don’t see any more plants,” Harri reported. His hands were stained so richly with blood, it was a wonder if it’d ever come out—or if this experience would stay with him forever. And yet he was not shaking; instead, eerily still.

Dami did not speak. She held Winnie’s arm, staring at the damage sustained. Tabi shook her shoulder. She blinked up at her sister, and let go, letting the others wrap up the last of her cauterized wounds.

Tiredness weighed heavy on her. Grace had never thought of her spirit as ‘weighted’ before... though she certainly felt so now, lingering by the floor, overlapping with it.

“I’ll get her to bed.” Ava proposed, relieved to have something to do. “She’ll need food and water when she wakes up.”

“What if she starts blooming again?” Ciro muttered, before raising his voice a bit, “Someone’ll have to keep watch. In case she wakes up.”

“Are you volunteering?” Ave asked from the floor, looking up at him.

“I am.” Ciro said at once.

The shrill ringing of a timer.

Dami hesitated. Then, “bring her some strudel. Even if she doesn’t wake up immediately, the smell...”

“I’ll save her a plate,” Ciro said. The crowd shuffled as Dami moved to take care of the rest.

Quiet had already decided he’d spend some hours doing nothing too extenuating. Not even the sun would spot him. Anyone else was welcome to join him.

The fact Connie did had surprised him at first, given how reluctant he was to do anything involving sitting down. That was, until he’d started gossiping about the others; then it made perfect sense. Connie *loved* a captive audience.

He told Quiet about how he was starting to write a book, but not what it would be about (“Sos muy chico!” he insisted, which was *infuriating*, they were the same age even if not the same height), about Harri’s rendezvous with Tabi, about his latest theories of why and how the Terrific Trio was still so loyal to each other...

Ave, he could understand, but he had never really gotten how or why Ciro had warmed up to Paco so quickly. When Quiet asked him about this, Ciro smiled sheepishly and said, “Guess

I've always dreamed of a way to keep going, no matter what. And what Paco can do... I suppose it stuck with me."

That made sense to Quiet. Connie, on the other hand, was of the opinion that Ciro just had a massive crush on Paco. When he said as much over dinner in front of the entire group one night, both Ciro and Paco got so mad Quiet thought they were going to *actually* murder Connie. Tabi intervened before anything could happen, and Connie seemed to find the entire situation hilarious.

Quiet was just glad they weren't cleaning bloodstains off the kitchen floor.

Connie continued to ramble, somewhat to himself.

It was a small thing, but Quiet found the white noise of it extraordinarily settling. He'd stopped really listening or keeping up with the big picture some time ago. He occasionally tuned back in to hear Connie planning something nefarious he'd either tell him to reel back in or offer up another sinister twist, but all the rest beyond the little details was lost to him. And he felt no real pressure to keep listening. Connie was saying nothing important and they both knew as much. Connie just enjoyed filling silences, Quiet knew, and Quiet liked to distract himself with meaningless tangents and asides, Connie knew.

And in the meantime, Quiet started to daydream. A week was not a long time, but it *was* a set time. One could do a lot of things in a week, if they knew by the end of it they would be scattered into another sum odd thirty trillion pieces.

He stretched idly in his chair, barely cognizant of the action. He could go outside later, perhaps? Might do his aching muscles some good; not to exert, just to exist. He wanted to stretch his wings out to their full potential, in open air. Connie would be on-board with some lollygagging. Ave would try to get him to climb a tree again. He still needed to see if he could fly, let alone try to divebomb someone. The thoughts passed by idly, not needing elaboration.

They turned to the recent additions to the household, as unexpected as they were.

Grace needed a room, as did Tabi and Dami. Quiet wasn't sure if Winnie was planning on staying or striking out on her own somewhere; he'd never imagined he'd even be *able* to consider her attached to him or anyone else in his flock. He wondered how she'd managed to change without him noticing, like that, that the *Witch* had begun to care for him and his companions. He hadn't offered her a blood offering, and yet she was closer to forgiving him regardless. There must've been a smaller action he took at some point to earn that trust and put her at ease. Maybe many. Though it had to be unnoteworthy, didn't it? A subconscious breadcrumbing. Was it a good thing?

Had Ciro finished getting all of Felipe's things out of his room? Would that suffice, would they need to get more stuff? How long did they plan on staying?

A few others had made their way into the room. Connie's voice changed direction. He was ranting on to an unimpressed Nando about something, or nothing. Maybe everything. He sounded lively and bright. A relief; he wasn't doing well earlier, after seeing so much of

Quiet's gore, after seeing himself die. Voices weren't supposed to die. Quiet shouldn't have let him see that; it was irresponsible of him. At least he was still himself.

He found Dami's newfound skill in self-assertion greatly reassuring; maybe it was because Dami had Tabi, that she'd been learning to be more independent like her probability twin. He didn't think he had involvement in that one. Ava... well, Quiet knew where Ava would be staying.

Was there anything else he could do, besides make the others feel at home? He wasn't used to playing host. Not of a household. Not to guests. Let alone to new additions. He took Princesses *out* of cabins, he didn't let them *in* and stay with them for extended periods... at least, not pleasantly.

He felt a pressure; a soft, gentle, full-palm brush of f—

(REVULSION) STOP! LET ME GO!

Quiet was on the other side of the room. His entire back lit on fire, his legs and ankles too, like he'd twisted around and slammed himself into the farthest wall. His wings were— he—

(AGONY) I CAN'T TAKE IT! IT HURTS!

He folded his wings in tight, tight, tight. Feathers fluffing out, ruffling, denying the attempts of hands to smooth them into shape. To preen, to pet— his head was light and his body was a tripwire and he wasn't even real.

It was a reflex.

A natural reaction.

Just what happened when his wings got touched.

When his feathers were plucked.

Revulsion ran from the point of contact down through each fiber and pin and muscle, sensations of fingers carding through individual feathers and running through— gentle, like muscle contractions in the throat that pulled bile up from the stomach. Touched, badly, *everywhere*. The burning could not localize on his wings, it couldn't, it couldn't, he did not want it to, but he could feel it *so much* in *everywhere*.

He wasn't being *plucked*. He knew it. He *knew* that much. He jerked his wings back from the shield they took around him, peeking out to confirm. He *knew* it was Cain. He didn't know when he appeared but he knew. It was him. His hand. He *knew* it wasn't **Her**.

His hand. Still, in the open air. Frozen at the exact point in place Quiet's wing had once been, and was now far away from. His eyes, staring. Regarding. Expression unreadable but gaze inescapable, transfixed on the trembling form before him. His hand flexed, once, fingers curling to his palm before the offending arm went limp at his side.

He felt it too much, too much. Like ice and needles that drilled into nerves. An imprint like a brand. He could *still* feel it—ghosting, trailing, not really there. It wanted him to join it. To be a ghost himself.

He wasn't going to approach. Quiet couldn't think that way. He wasn't going to advance. He didn't make advances. It was *Cain*.

Cain did not tug on his strings. Cain did not try to control him. If anything, Cain did the exact opposite. Cain, if Quiet had to guess, just wanted to touch them; a simple curiosity for curiosity's sake. It wasn't harmful.

It was *preening*.

He needed to calm down.

His body was on *fire*. The *wrongness* of it was coming from inside him, tearing him open from the inside out, an implosion that ripped through his soul. He ducked his head low and ran his hands over his head and through his hair and down his neck and breathed *harshly* under guard and shield and cosmic limbs that were not meant to— meant to— couldn't feel.

There was nothing *wrong there*. It wasn't like he was one to ask for things when the simplest act was just to *do* something, it wasn't like he *did* much to them at all, nothing was wrong, everything was fine. They didn't want to upset him. He didn't do anything. The room was just too small.

He had thought he could take the nice-bad too, he had thought it.

If it was preening— wishful thinking— Cain always had an eye for Quiet's dignity. If there was something he cared about, it was that. They wanted their wings pristine. More importantly, they wanted to feel worthy of being cherished. He wouldn't have cared, it was just a matter of presentation, but still, but *still*. They *wanted* it to just be *nice*.

Sound rushed back to the room, all of a sudden. Too much, too sharp. Movement rushed back. The amber shattered.

He couldn't move. In the void between one moment and the next, others did it for him.

His head was ducked into Nando's shoulder. Whether he did it of his own accord or not didn't seem relevant. Nando was holding the back of their head, supporting them. Or perhaps shielding them from the airborne projectiles.

In their periphery, they caught flashes and whirls of things being flung across the room— movement so fast only a snapshot was caught in the eye.

The first couple of things were light, but fast; a pencil with a specially sharpened tip thrown like a dart right at Cain's face stuck out from the other more immediate items like plastic cups. He didn't react, merely stood and took the barrage, not so much as flinching when the pencil-dart brushed past his cheek just under his left eye. Then the items got heavier: a book,

a paperweight. Cain elected to side-step these. That's when Connie started slinging words, too, enunciated by his pelting and barrage.

Quiet was glad they were not in the kitchen. He didn't want Connie to start tossing knives. He was good with knives. He never missed.

Secondhand (*anger*) was something he never liked to feel, it tasted of ash and made him feel wrong-footed, but he never thought it would come from Connie of all people.

“—gonna ruin this for him malnacido mononeuronal,” Connie was saying, pacing quick across the room as if to fling himself at Cain once he realized the projectiles weren't getting him the response he was after. He spread his arms like a bird did its wings, Quiet thought, trying to make himself larger, to take up more space, movement erratic and energetic, almost bouncing off the walls.

Waiting for something, body moving but face switching to impassive. Quiet wondered for a moment whether he really thought he was fooling anyone. Contempt or boredom would have satisfied Quiet that he truly didn't care; lack of an expression meant he was fighting his emotions.

“You unblinking *freak*.”

A short lived one. That wall broke into pieces as Connie kept talking, voice rising higher in volume with each word. “Do you *think* before you act? Think at all? Do you even understand anything about what's just happened, what you've done?”

“You're overreacting,” Cain said, to Connie, but Quiet heard the message just as well. They felt inclined to agree; it wasn't his fault. “That was barely a graze.”

Barely a graze. And what had they done? He still felt light-headed and nauseous; sick with himself, and he hadn't even touched him. He wanted to crawl into himself, shame building under his burning skin. This was pathetic.

Some more pressure, reminding him he had a shape; Nando tightening his grip on him. Right, he wasn't in the woods, that was just him.

(Disapproval) (Concern) Don't call yourself that again, please.

Okay, what word should they use, then? Every time they broke one of Nando's rules, he never seemed to figure out some sort of punis— *reaction* was to follow after. Quiet wasn't about to be the one to remind him.

Even if the description was accurate. Quiet tried to transmit that to Connie, tried to send him (*calm*), but he found himself looking at a wall. He couldn't scale it. Like before, there was a wall in the woods.

“No, no. Can you take anything seriously at all? Are you capable of thinking, of any self-reflection? He *just* got his wings back, can you not let them *be* for five seconds?”

“It's different. Something new to explore,” Cain said, a lilt to his tone, and Connie bristled.

“No, don’t talk about them. *You* don’t get to say *shit* after what you just did,” Connie gestured to Quiet as if in demonstration. He didn’t want to be demonstrated like that. What a display of *weakness* he must’ve appeared as, for a mere gesture to convey ‘what Cain did’ in Connie’s eyes. “What the *hell* made you think you had the right to touch—”

“Graze,” Cain corrected.

“To *touch* them?” Connie insisted.

“He still hasn’t said anything,” Cain said. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“He doesn’t *have* to!” Connie’s voice was almost a bird’s call in its shrillness. “You don’t get to pin this on him, you didn’t give him a chance to say anything at all. And even then, *this* is the most firm ‘no’ he’s given... *ever*, I think.”

“Yeah,” Nando added over Quiet. “You have to understand that much. He didn’t like it the first time. He *really* didn’t like it now. It’s *never* happening again.”

“It isn’t me who he’s afraid of,” Cain dismissed. Correctly. It wasn’t Cain’s fault that Quiet thought he was someone else, somewhere else. Quiet needed to get a handle on reality. Touch... helped with that. It came from a logical place. “Regardless of who or what he thought he was reacting to, he’s just oversensitive. His wings are new, aren’t they?”

“Exactly, too new for you to be putting your boney hands on them.”

Spindly, Quiet would describe them as. Thin. All the better to pry at crevices with.

He knew what his skeletal structure looked like, knew what the tendons and nerves looked like when even the bone was stripped away. Nerves and threads wove similarly, at times. Could unspool and spread out further in branches; to pierce hearts and cradle spirits.

“...get used to them somehow,” Cain spoke, and Quiet only caught the half end of it.

He was looking at them. Daring them to say something. It should be easy, but his heart beat too loud in his throat.

Connie almost spluttered. “Touching them without warning doesn’t help, what is wrong with you?!”

“It’s not going to hurt,” Cain said. That was a given, with him.

“It can definitely hurt,” Nando said. “You felt it.”

“There’s *something* wrong with you.” Connie was pacing again, set off. It reminded Quiet of a shark, the way he was circling Cain.

“You never do anything until you find the absolute worst things to ruin everyone’s day with.” He ran a hand through his hair, fixed his scarf, agitated. Distressed. “Why are you like this? Why don’t you ever try something normal for a change, what is wrong with you?”

Cain smiled. "You mistake me for you."

"I am NOT you!" Connie nearly tore his own throat open, stumbling in his pacing, stomping his feet where he stood. The volume startled Quiet. "I annoy people, I make them not think of bad stuff. The only times *you* act are to cause distress and pain in other people. You don't even *enjoy* the things you do. Do you *have* a hobby? Interests? A life? Or do you just float around siphoning off everyone else's?"

Cain stilled then, tilting his head, gaze shifting from following Connie's movements to staring into open air, middle distance, someplace far away. Connie froze, shocked. Then he stood straighter, emboldened by the reaction.

"I'm right? I'm *right*," Connie said, a little breathless from the rant. Cathartic relief broke out onto his face in a sinister grin, a little too wide, almost manic, before he smothered it and took one shaking step forward. "You stand there all aloof and detached like you're above it all. But you're not. You're just like the rest of us, aren't you? Worse. You've really fallen beneath everyone else and are just scrabbling to drag us down with you."

He wasn't listening, Quiet understood. Cain wasn't listening. He was focused on something else entirely, whatever line had resonated with him.

"You're not going to help any of us. You're just... using us."

Cain's head righted itself. It was the only way Quiet could describe the movement, like it wasn't joined to the body. Like he was coming back into himself, his eyes refocusing; and it was like nothing happened at all. As if there was no moment that had passed.

"Oh? Do you know what will and won't help them? Do you have any specifics? I wonder what gave you the 'right' to speak for him." Cain leaned forward. "I thought you said 'we weren't making rules for them.' You dropped that facade almost as fast as you gave up on him."

"He didn't." Nando interrupted, voice curt. "Connie never gave up on him."

(Reminder) Nor did you.

Cain glanced at Nando for the briefest of moments. A dismissal. "The Decider wouldn't prefer you over someone who could actually *last*."

Connie stopped dead in his tracks.

Slowly, slowly, he took a step back and looked Cain over again, sizing him up. Quiet could see the gears turning in his head. Clicking puzzle pieces together.

Did he have the right to feel the simmering heat of frustration? 'The Decider' was *right there*, still sick to his stomach and not worth the entire conversation but he was *there*, and he knew what Cain liked to do. More than that, he had a rebuttal.

Connie's thread was woven around him again, as was Nando's. Easy for him to tell him.

(Confession) But I do.

(Distraction) (Confusion) Huh?

(Worth) You're second place and the first isn't Cain. Don't tell the others that.

(Pride) Don't let him get to you.

(Confusion) What? Hold on... (Distraction) No, that's not... (Disbelief) No.

Connie's face twisted into something wholly disbelieving. A hand raised to cover a dropped jaw.

"Oh my god," he said, voice a bare murmur beneath his breath as a conclusion was hit. He exhaled shakily as he removed his hand, staring through Cain as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. He almost laughed. Almost screamed. "Is *that* what this is all about? You're fucking *jealous*?!"

Cain... paused.

Quiet... blinked.

What? *What?*

Cain didn't do emotions, especially something like jealousy. Jealousy for what? Of what? Quiet didn't 'prefer' any of his voices, not *really*. They had all been *good* to him in their own ways. Be it in the Construct or after.

Cain tilted his head. Not like before, not internalizing some uncertain truth about himself he'd learned from a third party. Cain wasn't often easy to read. But that was a clearly incredulous body posture.

"So you say."

He looked away. A dismissal. This conversation was over. Like it had never happened in the first place.

(Dismissal) You don't have to let them drag you to their level. You know for yourself what you think.

Quiet knew that. No point in stating the obvious.

And then, Cain was gone, like he'd never been in the room in the first place, leaving as readily as he arrived. A shame the burning didn't leave with him. He took it away the first time. Though he doubted the others would've let Cain get close enough to fix what he'd done; Quiet wasn't sure if he wanted Cain to fix it, either. If he could handle the proximity. If he could trust himself to handle it. It was hard to breathe. Just sometimes.

Connie leaned against a wall once Cain was out of sight. Exhausted. Coughing from a sore throat. A fierce sort of *(pride)* in his eyes. "You okay?"

Was he? Quiet shifted. Still burning. Still in Nando's hold. If he didn't leave it for a few eternities, he would be happy. He would be okay. He wasn't, now, but... just sometimes. He tried to be. He could keep trying, for now, still like this.

Chapter End Notes

SPANISH TRANSLATIONS

Entiendo lo que decís y quiero darte la razón, pero ahí estaríamos mal los dos: I get what you're saying and I would agree, but then both of us would be wrong.

No tengo el tiempo ni las crayolas para seguir explicándote las cosas: I don't have the time nor the crayons to keep explaining things to you. - calling him both a fool and childish.

Sos un estúpido, ¿sabés?: You're an idiot, did you know?

Primero que nada, buenos días: First of all, good morning.

Sos muy chico!: You're too little/young.

Thanks Até, for helping us with that first scene!!

Chapter 19: Tiburones en el bosque

Chapter Summary

Naught escapes the perceptions of the wilds. Among the twisting roots is an innate, snaking knowledge of contradictions which break logic between great forces and terrible objects. Embrace, for a peace unlike anything ever known. Pull away, and discover truths of horrors beyond your worst imaginations. They come together and separate ad infinitum, in a sweet and endless pattern.

Chapter Notes

Was told the names were confusing if they were at the end so here they are, at the beginning!

Broken - Borja
Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi
Cold - Caín
Contrarian - Connie
Hunted - Avellano/Ave
Opportunist - Oleander/Oli
Paranoid - Paco
Cheated - Ciro
Hero - Fernando/Nando
Smitten - Felipe
Skeptic - Harrier/Harri
Prisoner - Tabi/Tabitha
Damsel - Dami/Damiana
Witch - Winnie/Winifred
Tower - Thelka
Adversary - Ava
Nightmare - Clara
Spectre - Grace
Stranger - Plethora

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Winnie wasn't sure where she was. All the world fell to delirium, fever-sick with heat exhaustion and the bodily aches of having spent too long running, too long standing alone. Her vision swam. Blurry and unreal, her bloody skin—rife with scratches and tears—textured with buds and blossoms she didn't have the strength to resist. She curled her arms in. It was a

vain effort to protect what little of her remained, unblemished and unhurting... as the world around her started to warp.

Wherever she was, she wasn't alone. The world groaned. Wood creaked, pushed beyond its limits, the sound growing louder and more insistent around her.

At first it was almost gentle. It lifted her body delicately off the ground as the floor shifted beneath her. Tips of roots curled under her arms, around her waist, and pulled her softly into a laying position. They wove around her, supporting her neck and skull, facilitating her leaning back into them, laid down within the grain of their growth.

The sound drowned out all else. Pressed against her as it was, the weight of the world came in from all sides, compressing her down into herself. Amber-like sap dripped from the wounds of the wood, mirroring her own, as she was sealed shut and preserved, pristine and perfect just as she was.

She closed her eyes, feeling the world close in on her. It promised to smother her.

But, soon enough, the cradle of the growing roots started to feel suffocating. It held her unbearably tight, a cradle turned and twisted into a cocoon, a chrysalis. Roots which once merely supported her neck began wrapping around her windpipe. Then that tightness gave way to bulging pressure as they began to constrict.

The sound of creaking wood was drowned out by the snaps and pops of her bones, pain flooding her senses as she felt her skin deform, shaped unnaturally by the living walls, living woods, living wild, living...

Tears welled in her eyes, bones splintering and flesh swelling with trapped blood. She couldn't move, her chest compressed too tight to inhale enough to scream. Pitifully, she whined, and the high-pitched crying couldn't rise above the symphonies of the wild singing along with her. A lullaby to put a screaming infant to sleep.

Something critical snapped, and she couldn't feel her limbs. A root trailed along her cheek and wiped her tears. Her jaw broke. Something snagged at her back. She stopped feeling much of anything. Anything *tactile*, that is—the pain continued to register just fine. The fever haze lifted. Despite her newfound clarity in the terror of the moment, she was unable to connect between brain and body, connection severed as easily as it was created.

The pressure was unfathomable. Too vast to hold. She couldn't breathe. Her vision swam with red, her head pounding with trapped blood.

Pain, pain, pain pain pain stop stop make it stop—

And just when she thought she couldn't take anymore, finally, mercifully, her skull burst open. Roots raced to take in the liquid contained in her grey matter...

...and... *her*...?

Ages and ages and ages ago, too many years to count beyond 'once upon a time,' a god gave a mortal a box. Contained within that box was armageddon, oblivion, the very end of the world. The mortal was instructed, with only the barest understanding of the stakes and the understanding that gods were to be revered for the fear they inspired, to dispose of the box without ever, ever, ever peeking inside. Long, or short, that mortal may have traveled; at the end of the day, the important thing was that their curiosity couldn't resist the temptation, and the box couldn't be closed once it had opened.

Connie was that box. And he was that mortal. He'd already opened himself up, and yet here he was, trying to cram the lid back on and ignore everything he'd learned over the past 24 hours.

He ended a world already. For nothing, too; his Stranger was not the one he'd found in that cabin, and was not the one he'd found in that house. Whoever they were, they made him itch. And the so-called god the box came from, because he didn't listen well enough, abandoned him to the consequences of his actions.

And... *Cain*. Connie, for the life of him, could not get the story straight; chaos whirled around him and he was only barely keeping a lid on it.

Cain was like Connie in all the wrong ways and unlike him in every way Connie cared about. Ciro saw that before Connie himself did. And then it became all Connie could see.

Cain was mortal like the rest of them and completely unaware of that fact. He felt and he needed and he got jealous.

Cain hurt people for his own amusement and felt no remorse for his past or shame at the idea. Cared for the concept of boundaries only in the way crossing them would get reactions. Cain pushed Ave to violence, Cain prodded at Connie to make him yell, Cain *touched Quiet's wing*.

Cain—!

Connie couldn't believe it, still. Even the barest thought of it made his jaw clench and his teeth grind and his fists shake.

Quiet had pulled back, the first time. Connie saw it. Everyone saw it. Yet nobody had said anything! Harri just carried right on with his questioning, Gonchi *had* pushed back a bit, but they had collectively moved past the moment too quickly.

'Too much,' it had maybe said, *'I'm not ready yet,'* it had maybe said. Or maybe it said, *'I don't want this,'* and there was no *'yet'* to speak of, and there was no reason to inquire further. Maybe those wings deserved space and not to be pet and pulled at like a toy for Cain to amuse himself with. Maybe *someone* had to learn how to keep his hands to himself!

He had no clue how to stand Cain being even in the same room as him. In the same house.

Was he going mad? No; Ave, Ciro, and Paco all saw it too. Ave had *done something about it*, repeatedly, multiple times now—and yet it meant nothing. Cain positioned himself above

consequences. He picked on Connie in broad daylight, in front of everyone, and no one batted an eye. He surrounded him, loomed over him, and to everyone else it was just Cain being Cain.

It was too fresh, lurched in his stomach. They were different, they had to be, Ciro saw it. Connie was himself and Cain was not; there were *clear* differences between them.

Connie cared and Cain did not. Connie relented and Cain did not.

Connie gave up and Cain did not. Connie succumbed and Cain did not. Connie died— *he can't think about that right now— too fresh, too fresh*, he felt sick—

Winnie nearly died. Winnie nearly died, and so Connie couldn't say it. Connie couldn't lament the newest line Cain discovered he could cross because there were more pressing concerns at the moment than the newest addition in a long line of Things Cain Did, a list only so long because he never stopped adding to it because no one cared! No one cared! No one cared, and Connie *did*.

Connie *and* Nando did.

Quiet did too, had told him himself.

The others didn't know, he hadn't told them— how could he, after what had happened in his absence? Because things still happened in his absence. Because the world did not revolve around him and he knew it. A chasm opened somewhere within him that came with knowing he had laughed with her that morning and she had almost died. Gone.

He didn't want a repeat of that experience. He didn't want to feel that emptiness again. *He had to think something else, he— he could write it on the whiteboard, maybe, he could—*

There was an itching beneath his skin. It pushed in bursts towards his throat. Because nobody was doing anything. They were talking about what happened with Winnie, yes, and that must have been awful to witness, and there were theories being strung over dinner which he was barely tasting, and nobody with eyes to see was looking at the *mountain of trouble building itself up in front of them*.

He forced himself to swallow as he listened to the noise around him, trying to discern individual voices from the white noise. Silverware scraping plates, glasses clinking against the tablecloth. Louder than noise could be. Shrill. Painful. *Fracturing, rupturing, shattering*.

In front of him, a seat to the left, Nando kept sneaking glances at him. Stopping a little too long, mouth parting to speak for just a moment. Like he wanted to tell him something. Why didn't he? Why was everyone stopping just short of *doing* anything about anything?

Harri was talking, saying how that happened, how they had stopped Winnie from becoming soil. Dami using her power leak to mitigate Winnie's, they *literally* fought fire with fire, what makes one healthy and one life threatening? Shouldn't they be worried for Dami too? Why wasn't Tabi saying anything?

Connie didn't want to hear about the process, about the plucking of roots (he *hated* that wording) and how he hoped Winnie couldn't feel it, was he insane? Winnie must have felt that, they were growing inside her flesh, much like how *Quiet must have felt it when their—*

He bit his cheek. The sharp pain brought him back to his body. His hands were shaking so much he couldn't scoop up the food. He put it down, gnashing his teeth.

Cain *took Harri's feelings*. And everyone was just going about their day like that didn't matter, like they didn't know that. Cain wasn't even at the table; clearly, he didn't care about what had transpired.

He wished Ciro was there, he would understand the festering inside his skin, it itched and burned bright. But he wasn't, he was attending to Winnie, who had almost died. She almost died. Nobody was supposed to die anymore, that was the entire point, and yet Winnie almost died. She could still die. All of them could die. *Connie* had—

Oli was sitting to his right, impossible to miss. His voice cut through the bubble of white noise. For once, not talking to the majority.

From the corner of his eye, Connie watched as Oli's hand struck out like a viper, finding purchase on Ave's left wrist and holding tight. Ave flinched, arm twitching painfully as it tried to jerk back and was instead kept in place, baring his teeth for a split second as Oli met his eyes.

"We're in need of a little sidebar about your *biting* problem."

Ave was giving him a murderous look as he reluctantly slowed down. "*Problem,*" he parroted. Dropped the fork on the table when he couldn't bring his hand down. It clanged. Connie winced.

Oli scoffed, "obviously." He didn't move, though his eyes did a quick scan of the room. "While he's not here: if *I* could see you were rearing back to bite, *he* could see it too."

"He wouldn't have reacted. It's not his thing."

"He was *baiting* you, trying to get you reckless with your guard down," Oli informed. "He knows what happens when he doesn't react to you, why would he do the same thing three times in a row?"

Ave glanced down at Oli's hand still holding his wrist in place, then flicked his eyes in a quick motion too quick for Connie to follow. Pointing out someone else in the room, Connie had to guess. "And you'd have me stand down and let him have his way?"

"Just saying," Oli said, grinning, "we're in need of a bit of a change in strategies, before the wrong person gets hurt."

Ave's gaze sharpened. Connie felt his weight dragging him down in his seat. Oh, so they were pulling back on Cain's main opposition? The only person who might have stopped him the slightest bit? How was that a viable option?

Oli leaned in. Conspiratorial whispers grated on Connie's ears, s's too sharp and fricatives too crisp. "It's just a matter of confusing him. You see, a guy like him likes to get close, get cozy and familiar with us types, so he can pick at us from under our skin; so all we need to do is start taking turns."

"On watch?"

"On *guard*," Oli clarified. "What use is a hunter with his hands broken?"

Ave narrowed his eyes. His arm jerked as if to pull away, or to push down. "I wouldn't—"

"You would." Oli's grip held firm. "He knows how to make you. He knows a little more every time he gets us to react. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He'll keep knowing unless you stop telling him."

"See, you have so many tells. Every time you react, you have a tell. You're honest. *I'm* not. You know how to fight, and you've been preparing so much for it you've forgotten how to run. You've forgotten how to hide. He's *made you* prepared for it, learned exactly how to goad you to it, because you told him how."

"You're about to try pulling away again, and I know that because your face twitches when the signal passes through your brain. He was anticipating you, and I know that because his pupils dilated when you were about to strike. And you didn't notice."

Ave didn't pull away. Even with a certain distance, Connie could see the white of his eyes. Oli grinned.

Oli's hand loosened from around Ave's wrist, sliding down so their palms touched. He held Ave's hand firmly in his own and shook it, briefly, curtly, once.

Connie kicked Oli under the table. It made contact. Oli's breath caught between his teeth for a brief moment. But he finally released his grip on Ave, turning to Connie with a slight smile. It froze around the edges. Instantly.

Connie's hands were still shaking. The inside of his cheek hurt. Ave had just been cowed by someone who still didn't see what the problem really was. There was something pushing against his throat.

Noise was coming from wrong angles, hitting his eardrums in a way that rendered words into static. It was all but shattering glass and smoke and mirrors. His scarf itched against his neck. Winnie had shared it with him. Winnie was not at the table anymore. Nothing was getting done about anything and everything was happening at the same time. His vision swam, spinning in kaleidoscopes, turning in on itself.

His throat hurt from holding it in. It would tear him apart. An inward cyclone. Everything was so *loud*. He couldn't focus. His mouth opened.

"¡BASTA!" air rushed out. The last note going and going until it was the only sound in the world. The only loud thing was himself, everything else had stopped.

Everyone was looking at him. Even the sound of splintering glass (utensils on plates, the sound of meal and community, not the sound of a psyche breaking under pressure) had stopped. A few looked up at him, a couple— Oli and Nando— had already been staring. And others... others still didn't get it, and after a brief pause, went on chattering between themselves.

Even after that they still ignored him? He hadn't even started yet. Harri had no right to talk over him. He flailed his arms once. “**¡BASTAAA!**”

When had he stood? His lungs hurt. He took a deep breath. Turned to Harri with his whole body, ignoring how his hip banged on the table's edge. “Did you ever figure out which one was your good eye? Not that it matters, I don't think. It's funny how blind you are to everything even with glasses.”

“What are you doing? Sit down.”

“Oh, am I making you upset? You haven't needed Cain's services again?”

Just as he thought, that made Tabi snap into alert. It paid to pay attention to even the most garrulous of people. “Excuse me?”

“It's nothing—”

“Like hell it's nothing.” Connie advanced. “I asked you a question and you don't seem to have answered it.”

“You won't listen to me. You ask a question but you already have an answer in mind, nothing I say here and now can prove anything to you,” Harri pointed out. “You hate him, so there's no way for you to be objective. I can't prove a negative. The only thing that could possibly prove either of us right is if you sit down and wait. Until, that is, you realize nothing's going to happen, and you have nothing to wait for.”

Wasn't that rich?

Dami had forgone eating entirely, glancing between the two of them like they were headlights and she a doe. Nando's lip trembled, like he was dying, still, to say something.

“Deflection's a bad look,” Oli interjected. He looked like he wasn't sure who he was meant to be rooting for.

“Isn't it kinda your job to know things?” Connie said, leaning back, the tone of his voice whistling with the movement. Harri's head raised, face contorting at the non-sequitur. Tabi glanced Connie's way, still reeling and searching for an explanation in the rubble of the bombshell. He caught her eyes. “Maybe we should replace you with a guy actually capable of answering simple questions.”

Now *that* hit a nerve, as he knew it would. He wasn't expecting Oli to flinch, too.

“‘Simple?’ I can make it right and simple for you then,” Harri retorted, saving Connie from having to think on the implications. “There's no reason to suspect Cain—or I—of anything

because there's nothing wrong with what Cain did. And there's nothing wrong with what Cain did because *I asked*, and *Cain knows how to pace himself*."

"Does he now?" Connie hissed, voice strained for how high he wanted to pitch it, from the disbelieving laugh he was biting back to let the words have their stay.

"Do I *look like* I'm dead on my feet?" Harri said, gesturing to himself. Tabi's eyebrows raised.

"Does he *really*?" Connie repeated, not caring for rhetoric. "What '*evidence*' did he forge to convince you of that, smart guy?"

Harri didn't roll his eyes, but by the sigh he let out it was a near thing. "You're proving my point. I don't know what image you have of him in your head, but your paranoid thoughts have near nil correlation to any observable behaviors of his. Cain wouldn't 'forge' anything, it's not in his nature. He's not sneaky like some *others* at the table. He was very blatant in his intentions throughout everything."

"Wow," Connie drawled, leaning forward and pressing his weight onto the table. He wouldn't typically describe himself as 'sharp'; but he felt as though the grin on his face could cut glass if he let it. "Impressive! Almost every word you said was wrong. I don't think you know anything about 'nature.'"

Ave hummed as if to wordlessly agree.

(Exasperation) This again?

(Reassurance) Shh, I'm defending you.

*(Insistence) There's nothing to defend me **from**.*

Nando caught his eye. Gave a very slight nod. That was all Connie needed.

"Maybe you're right!" Connie said cheerily, standing up straight and leaning back, only the tenuous grip of his hands on the table keeping him from teetering back too far. The kinetics of it, so close to the edge he could almost feel the fall, was freeing. He hoped flying would have a similar sense of vertigo, of absolute nausea. That'd be fun. "Maybe Cain is so, *so* intentional with how he 'paces himself,' you know? Maybe he knows *a lot* about it!"

"Maybe you've got it all figured out. What evidence do we have on the record? On your little precious whiteboard? Well, we know he must not have paced himself *too* well with Ave all those times, what was it again? Two...?"

"Three, nearly," Harri corrected, glancing across the table to where Ave and Oli sat.

"Oh, *right!* You know me and numbers," Connie said. "Wow, a whole three times Cain just *missed the mark* and totally went overboard with Ave. But, you know, maybe you can help me out here with this one, too, Harri. Or any of you!"

He gestured to the rest of the room. Silent as ever. A mass of faceless bystanders, all crowded into one space. *Please, do anything.* His hands shook. He smiled wider.

“Because,” he breathed, “I just can’t quite count everything Cain’s done to *me*.”

“The same thing you do to everyone else?” Harri’s gruff voice undercut his performance. “You’re acting like a child.”

Connie flinched. *You’re starting to understand.* He lost his grip on the table, staggering backward, just a step or two. *You don’t have to start caring now.* His breath escaped him as a pent-up steam, like a kettle going off. *You mistake me for you.*

“Harrier.” Quiet snapped. Connie barely heard.

“Don’t tell me you’re buying his attention-seeking,” Harrier said, and Connie definitely heard that. “Cain noticed Connie didn’t like the comparison, he kept doing it, that’s all it is. I don’t see why we have to interrupt dinner for this.”

There was the horror, again. The pain the other-him never had to feel. It was stuck between his ribs. He was struck by the thought: metal felt so cold, so inanimate, so unnatural. Ah. That wasn’t supposed to be there.

Ciro knew a thing or two about knives in bodies that weren’t supposed to have knives in them, Connie thought as he grounded himself and sucked in a new breath. Shame he had his hands full at the moment with someone who might be dying in the other room. Connie kinda felt like he could be dying. At least a little bit of him.

“That’s not the same thing,” Paco interfered, saving him from the twist of the knife. He knew the opened wound all the same. He’d bled in that house. No one said anything then, either.

“That was really mean,” Dami blurted out. “Connie makes people laugh, but he wasn’t laughing then.”

“I wasn’t,” Connie agreed, his voice breathless in a way he hoped it could’ve come out sounding something like a laugh. How relieving. People thought he was funny? “I really wasn’t.”

“Gonchi wasn’t either, that time.”

“It wasn’t that serious and you know it,” Gonchi said, glossing over the fact he had yelled at him with his entire chest. That had been a little scary. And a little surprising, how Gonchi had been scared for him.

“And where was all of this gracious support when Cain was actually in the room?” Connie cried, affronted. For everyone that spoke up *now* he had to wonder where they’d been before, from where it all came from, where it went when the world collapsed in on him yesterday. He died and no one mourned him.

“I was right there.” Nando finally got whatever was stuck in his throat out, Connie hoped. He was staring at him with a certain look as if there were more to say, an unspoken

understanding between them both his steady gaze could communicate without words. Too bad Connie *liked* words.

(Concern) What are you talking about?

Quiet, to the side, looked lost in the confrontation; like he was trailing behind, following mere breadcrumbs of information. He glanced to everyone else, mirroring their reactions without understanding, searching their eyes for a context he didn't have.

(Trepidation) When did this happen? I've kept him in check, whenever he started... that I know of, I mean... (Guilt) I thought...

Not when he didn't have the awareness to watch; when he was lost in his own head, adrift in his own experiences and drowning in memories; when his empty eyes stared into middle distance as his mind collapsed in on itself. As much as it pained Connie to admit, Cain wasn't stupid.

(Fondness) I know you have. (Truth) (Omission) You've done everything in your power to help.

"You and the freak aren't a thing alike, I thought you knew," Gonchi said, like it was an obvious fact of the universe.

As if, somehow, the objectivity of fact overrode the subjectivity of individual perspective; as if his fallibility were not just as readily apparent, from the moment of his hatching. As if the continuous degrading of an observable fact wouldn't make it hard to see. As if the ocean's current wouldn't erode away the hardest of stone.

As if facts didn't deserve to be reaffirmed. Connie scoffed. "Oh, how rich is that, Mr. 'Scientific Rigor?' Everything in the world deserves to be proven except the worth of little ol' me."

"Are you actually—" Harri moved to rise, hand raised as if to act. His expression...

"You know what else should be reaffirmed?" Connie spoke quickly, so as to skip over whatever interjection he had planned.

(Anticipation) Showtime.

He practically felt Quiet's *sigh* deep in his bones. His thread hummed with the resignation of a begrudging allowance; a reserved disapproval that felt like besting a broken system. Something about the feeling was almost nostalgic. At least it wasn't disappointment, everyone knew even Oli wasn't over that one time.

Quiet's shoulders went forward, wings mimicking the movement, ducking down as if partially to shield him, to hide him away until the storm blew over. Nando did the exact opposite, lips trembling again, his entire body. Anticipation, mirrored.

"Exactly, that you don't *touch* people without permission."

Grace nodded to herself. Gonchi did, too; him and Ava both.

Harri squinted. “We couldn’t have known—”

“*Especiall*y the *second* time,” Connie finished his sentence. “When we all knew Quiet’s wings aren’t to be *touched*.”

Harri went still. *Very* still. “...How much is a ‘touch?’”

“Nothing.” Quiet spoke the word like a spell, like conversation would stop if he denied it harshly enough. His voice was his namesake. A whisper in the wind. “Barely a brush.”

“No. *No*. No, I *saw it*,” Connie hissed, standing to his full height, Quiet all of a sudden the only important party in the room. This was *not* a fact that would be denied. He *insisted*, “it was *intentional* and it was *slow*. Full palm in the center of the wing, Quiet, trailing down. Hand open like he was planning on it tightening. You didn’t even know he was in the room —”

Quiet had frozen just the same as the first time, really, for a brief second—a fraction of a second, limbs locked, eyes wide and misty. He sucked in air through his teeth, choking on his own breath. A terribly pained sound. Not to mention the shockwaves of whatever explosive agony he’d sent to Cain, the memory of an untamable trembling still burning in Connie’s thread. It was no “brush” in the sense of barely-there contact. It was a “brush” in the sense of petting through feathers like fur, savoring the sensation. And Quiet had looked *terrified*.

Graciously, Quiet had managed to flinch. It made the following assault on Cain far easier to target.

“—and he came for you out of nowhere. You didn’t like it the first time, you *definitely* didn’t need a repeat of the experience,” Connie omitted it. Quiet’s face had paled with the narration of what few details he’d started with. The rest of the room came back into focus. He addressed it, though his attention lingered a moment longer, “And he still did it. And, after Quiet pulled away, you know what he did after?”

Harri didn’t answer him, just sighed very, very deeply.

“Apologize?” Dami ventured, looking as though she was having trouble believing it herself. “Like he did with me?”

Tabi’s mouth pressed into a thin line. Her gaze was razor-sharp and pierced through Connie’s lack-of-soul. He wielded her attention like the weapon it was.

“He said,” Connie interrupted himself, disbelief coloring his laugh, “he’d said Quiet overreacted.”

Harri sank low, dropping his head into his hands. “Jo, otra vez...”

“I did.” Quiet swallowed. Connie’s stomach dropped. “He wasn’t looking for a reaction. Even if... even if it was more than a graze, it wasn’t malicious. It wasn’t anything to scream about.”

Ave's ears fell flat. A low growl built in his throat, then cut itself off.

"Do I overreact?" Paco said, wide eyes fixed on Quiet as though he was the only one in the universe. "Those first weeks, did I overreact?"

Harri blinked. "N—"

"I wasn't talking to you."

"After the Nightmare?" Quiet breathed. "No, of course that's not an overreaction."

"Then why would yours be?"

Quiet said nothing, though his eyes remained defiant.

Harri stared. Something flickered in his attention, struck silent for a blissful moment. Then he shook himself out of it.

"But Quiet's never reacted like *that* before," he said. "It's different for him. Paco was always like that. *This* is a development. A change in his case... highly correlated with us having all been forced to relive a particularly traumatic event and a high stress level. It's not normal."

"Normal?! I'm just as 'normal' as you are," Paco said defensively, a live wire. "If you knew what it *felt* like, you wouldn't be saying that!"

"And if..." Harri started, then trailed off. Mumbled something to himself, something Connie couldn't hear, then pressed his glasses hard into his face. He took a deep breath before continuing. "That's the thing. The pain. Neither of you are actually being hurt, it's psychosomatic."

"Psycho-what-now?" Gonchi was reaching the limits of his patience, greatly accelerated by difficult words.

"He's calling me a psycho, he thinks I'm *mad*!" Paco hiss-whispered.

"No! It's an actual phenomenon. Look: what you're dealing with is all in your head," Harri poked the side of his temple. "You're believing so hard in your own suffering, in the expectation of pain, that you make it real. You feel things that aren't there, because you're remembering things that haven't been here for a long time, and then you're focusing on the memories being triggered and the sensations of *that* instead of the present moment."

"You're starting to sound like *Him*," Connie warned.

"Well, he sure *sounds* smart!" Oli said.

"There has to be more to this than what you're implying," Harri said, voice low, and Connie considered throwing something at him. "He didn't try to keep Quiet in place, did he?... No, he didn't. From the tone of this whole outburst, it's clear that you would have said if he did. And Quiet would have reacted worse if he did. Like Quiet said, if he wasn't looking for a reaction, then he couldn't have been expecting one—so, following a coherent line of

reasoning, that couldn't have been his intention. At worst, his intentions were neutral curiosity and he was more ignorant than the rest of us to what Quiet could endure; at best..." and he trailed off, stewing.

So there actually was some semblance of a brain behind those pupils.

"At best," Nando corrected, "Cain hurt Quiet and then blamed him for being hurt."

Kind of like what Harri was doing now, it sounded like? Connie didn't get all the smart-sounding words, admittedly, but the framing of it was pretty familiar! Connie glared at him. Harri's lips pressed into a thin line, and gracefully, he didn't say anything else. Bit his tongue. Maybe he'd bite it off?... No, no, Connie didn't want that; not for *Harri*, at least.

"He said it didn't hurt," Quiet added. "Wasn't supposed to. I think... I—"

"You *flinched*," Connie told him, words drawling in his desperation to give them meaning.

"What he said or intended doesn't matter," Grace interrupted, trailing over to him and pausing shy of entering his personal space. "What *you* experienced matters."

Familiarity passed through Quiet's expression. His mouth parted in a silent 'oh,' then his expression cleared entirely. He nodded and sat back in his seat without another word, staring forward blankly.

Grace's hands moved to press his arm, or his shoulder, then stopped, her fingers curling in and arms retracting. She floated, aimless, beside him.

The conversation lulled.

The silence was deafening.

Harri blinked. "Exposure therapy," he said at last. "At best, it was an admittedly *shit* attempt at exposure therapy."

Quiet shivered. His wings wrapped him tighter.

(Revulsion) Don't like that word.

(...Levity) What, 'therapy?'

(Annoyance) No. (Nausea) 'Exposure.'

'*Too much, too much,*' that posture read. Connie would have to be blind not to see it.

"Without warning?" Tabi asked, eyes lidded and eyebrows raised, expression mirroring her unimpressed tone. "I don't think that one knows a thing about 'therapy' even as a concept. I seriously doubt that theory works as anything beyond a retroactive excuse."

At least some of the girls knew how to communicate clearly. In a way Harri had to understand, he hoped.

“I think we’re excusing a pattern we shouldn’t be getting comfortable with,” Tabi said, glaring at Harri and then turning to address Connie with more attentive eyes. “Someone should have a... ‘talk,’ with the chilly one, about proper boundaries. Easy enough to make some plans between ourselves for if he steps into *anyone’s* personal space again.”

Harri started to shuffle back noiselessly, accepting the impromptu task.

She took a breath, then took Harri’s attention, pulling him back from the commotion at the table to look her in the eyes. “Now, what is this about *you* accepting his ‘services?’”

They had listened to him. They were starting to do something. The moment didn’t feel triumphant at all. They should have started to do something without his input. They weren’t disembodied anymore, they could make their own decisions, they...!

“Do it after dinner, can you?” Ava cut in. “I’m still hungry!”

Connie had the sinking feeling that the momentum he’d been rolling with since he peeled his eggshell off was about to come to an abrupt end.

For now, he was running on what reserves he held and what brief boosts he could manage to scavenge. Quiet had just tugged on his thread, and he’d followed. The ensuing interaction was sure to stop him in his tracks, he knew in the depths of his heart and the place a soul in a good man would be, but until then, his feet continued to connect with the ground.

He had just wanted to help. One step forward. He had just wanted to help. Two steps forward. He had just wanted—

Had he crossed a line? He wanted to help, he wanted to defend them, protect them. Quiet said there was nothing, but Connie and Nando both saw something else; they weren’t hallucinating, it was as real as real things could be. But the commotion surrounded them, anyway, a chaotic confrontation with them at its center that held them and their suffering as its spectacle regardless of their say.

Thirteen steps forward and to the left. Out of earshot. As isolated from the rest of the group the two could get. Connie was glad he hadn’t been able to stomach whatever was for dinner, no matter how many dirty looks Paco threw his way.

He just couldn’t.

Quiet stopped walking, and Connie with him.

The air was still. Stiller than air was made to be, the absence of wind whistling in Connie’s ears. All fell eerily silent. His breathing was a disruption to the total stop, loud to his ears, momentum not meant to last in this time or place.

A pressure was building against it. Every fiber of his being needed to move; to fidget or shuffle or to spin around and run as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

Quiet, his back still turned to Connie, took a moment to stretch, raising his arms high and standing on the tips of his toes to extend to his maximum height. It wasn't anything impressive. His wingspan, though, was something else. Connie hadn't quite recognized how Quiet had always been curling them in around him. They surrounded him, softened his shape, accommodated them to the space. Now it almost felt like the space was accommodating to *him*, bending and warping as the wings stretched, and stretched, and stretched, and—like there was no end to them, never an end to them, just an endless expanse of a texture Connie couldn't describe that seemed to swallow light whole and reflect it, refract it, like chromatic glass. There were no walls in this room, it seemed. Those wings would've certainly bumped into them by now if they were real.

Eventually, Quiet must have stretched them to their limit, a size Connie found impossible, and sucked in a deep breath as his stretch reached its peak. Something popped with a sound like a shattered lightbulb and Quiet let out a deeply satisfied sigh, then relaxed himself back to a resting position.

The room was of normal size. Connie blinked. It remained as it always was. Quiet's posture was softer, like a carried tension had melted away with the gesture. His wings still appeared impossibly large, though Connie knew this was what they always appeared to him as. Nothing changed, not of him or his friend. He'd just seen something that'd been staring him in the face the whole time, unrecognized.

Quiet turned, slowly, to face him.

What... to say, after *that*?

Apparently, nothing.

Just the sound of wind and rustling feathers as all of reality wrapped around his shoulders and folded together at his back, pulling him into an embrace. An indescribable embrace. A wonderful embrace.

Words, words, did Connie *have* words for this?

(Pride) Thank you.

No, he decided, as Quiet tucked his arms beneath his own wings to pull Connie closer. He absolutely did not. What was he being thanked for? He didn't need to be thanked over what happened just before...

His throat tightened. Forcefully, he ignored it. Swallowed it down. It hurt. His shoulders trembled with the effort. His eyes burned, face tingling as it reddened, the telltale sign of tears incoming. *Not again.*

He hugged back after a moment, one hand careful to not touch any feathers, the other moving up to cradle Quiet's head. He'd been worried for nothing, he was fine, this was fine, *more than* fine.

He adjusted to hold them better. Not with his arms. There was a great unfurling not present in any one preset point in his body, unidentifiable—possibly everywhere he inhabited, possibly from no true point at all, inside and outside all at once. It felt *like*...

...Like pulsing, in waves from his heart and out through his skin and vibrating through his body. But not. There was no movement. There was no pressure.

...Like matter, like weightless extensions of himself that stretched outward in search of connection and contact, however tangible. But not. There was no altered sensation. There was no awareness.

...Like energy, like a million points of static electricity had sparked at once to release a great and terrible knowledge between them both, transmitted through uncountable signals through fibres and nerves and the cells neither should know the count of. But not. There was no shock that burned or hurt. There was no dispersal of light or potential.

Similar to, to a feeling, to an embrace, to an understanding; but not, not at all.

It felt like nothing, incomparable; unlike anything known or unknown throughout the worlds.

He wasn't quite cognizant of what it was, nor how, nor where. He knew why. He did not know substance or form. But he knew intent. The space-that-was-not-a-space, or perhaps was, kept Connie and Quiet... *(levity) (protection) (comfort) (peace) (gratitude)* ...together.

He wasn't scared of what this could mean. He accepted it.

Arms tightened around him. He felt a feeling like vertigo, but like falling forward instead, like a pull that grasped him insides-first. Not nauseating, not bad.

(Guilt) I'm sorry.

I should have known. I should have stopped it before it started.

You didn't deserve it. None of it was true.

The important thing wasn't the wings or the colors or the feathers, but who they were attached to. What they were feeling, because they had stopped it every time they were aware. That was the most they could do. They weren't omnipresent. They weren't a god.

The others' actions, Cain's actions, weren't their responsibility.

A hesitance.

(Resolve) I'll talk to him.

He was slammed back into reality, in his own body, in that house. Alarm coursed through him like a lighting bolt. Whatever had unfurled ceased in an instant, dissolving at once, crushed and bound all over again as Connie's cradle of Quiet with his actual limbs took on a new desperation. Latching onto them. Holding them in place, before they tossed themselves on the barbed wire.

(Panic) *HELL no?*

(Composure) *I want you as far away from him as possible thank-you.*

(Fondness) *...You're worried.*

(Embarrassment) *Well—! (Seriousness) For **good** reason. He shouldn't be around you.*

Quiet pulled back, then. Connie let him. He *had* to let him. The moment pittered out in whispers and dying embers and an echo that faded too soon as his arms that lingered by their side pulled away. They looked at him with a sort of bemused fondness on their face. He imagined by the set of tension on his own face that his expression wasn't quite the same.

(Puzzlement) *Fine, I'm going to my room. Happy?*

It wasn't *quite* what he was after. Quiet wasn't taking his concerns seriously, on their own, but they remained willing to honor them. That was fine. At least it was a step in the right direction, turned around and away from uncertain doom. At least they'd be safer there. No place safer than their own room, their own space.

(Satisfaction) *Very.*

Ciro heard none of it. He was busy hearing out the last of a fever-driven delirium; an orchestra of mumbled groans and muffled cries that had him triple-checking this damned bedridden woman for anything he could think of. Sprouting again? Not a damn prick on her. Reopening wounds? He was surprised to find she hadn't, with how she'd been thrashing about for the past thirty minutes. Fucking... ticks, fleas, leeches, a parasite of some kind? No.

What the hell was the matter, then? Why wouldn't she stop hurting?

Where was Harri when a guy *actually needed* some help with medical attention? He hated this. Ave would say the wounded needed sleep, that the fits would stop if she just felt safe. Paco would say it was Ciro's responsibility to wake her up and save her from these nightmares before they got worse. He'd managed both with the both of them. But no method was working for her. No, she was an *extra special* case, because of course she would be. Of course nothing could ever be simple, of course none of his experience mattered. Because she was only getting worse the longer she slept, he felt, and his every attempt to wake her only earned him new bloody scratches on his arms and a snap of her teeth he assumed would've been a bite to rival Ave's had he not learned to expect it and dodged in time.

It was at some point, when he'd become well and truly exhausted and resigned himself to just sitting on the floor next to his, now *her*; bed... that she'd finally slowed down. He'd frozen when she quieted, unwilling to be the thing that stirred her, unsure what the magic key was. He could hear, in the silence, between her still-too-shallow, but improving, breaths, an argument down the hall.

Could those fucks not be quiet for *five seconds*?

He had half a mind to storm down and tell them off, risking disturbing Winnie's rest like they were, but he was... admittedly, afraid to move.

Winnie's nose twitched, barely. He held his breath, and watched steadily as the muscles in her frame gradually loosened and her tension evened out. She curled into herself, hopefully comfortable, and stilled in that position. One loud huff of breath, like a disgruntled sigh... and that breathing evened out.

Ciro wanted to *collapse* from relief. *Finally. Fucking finally.* Out like a light. "Yeah, are you annoyed with all the work I'm putting in for you now?" He murmured, near-silently under his breath, in her direction. "Well. We'll see if... you want to talk after you wake up, yeah? In the morning. I'll lose my shit if you wake me up with your banshee screaming."

He listened, idly, to the lulling conversation downstairs. It sounded like Tabi and Harri were exchanging words. He hoped they'd shut themselves up before retiring here.

Footsteps down the hall. Forceful, stomping— *shut up, quiet down, you—!*

"Shh!" He hushed, hissing, as Gonchi passed by the room's open door. He paused, then turned as if to enter the room, arm pressed and leaning into the door's frame as Ciro frantically wove his arms to get him to *stop!* Gonchi glanced to the mass of blankets and fur huddled in his bed, then back to him. There was something up with his expression—angry, stern. He tilted his head, a universal gesture for *'come out here a second,'* a contextual implication of *'you need to hear about this.'*

Ciro glanced back at Winnie. Still sleeping, still unbothered. He hesitated. Then he got up, promising *'just a minute'* to no one in particular, and started out the door.

Blood ran. To places it shouldn't, in and out. Spilled away from its origin and navigating new tunnels the corpse never had before. Maggots crawled through and picked idly at its remains, nibbling at old skin. Worms lapped at what was liquified in the soil.

A thinning, remains spread out in atoms of elements ran too far a distance to recognize their original shape. A calcification into raw mineral, raw material, scattered in the wastes. Unwound, prepared to become a new everybody.

A dull tear. Strips of meat being peeled from bone, fiber after fiber, strand from strand, piece by piece. Delicate fingers, gently unraveling matter wholly aware and perceiving its state... but failing to understand. Failing to comprehend.

A slow, overwhelming, rearrangement. Pieces slotted and woven into a new place, an old place.

Dami was trying her best to put on a brave face. But tonight wasn't turning out very well at all, in her opinion. There wasn't much she could do for it, but she wanted to do everything in her power.

"I can help clean dishes," she'd offered Paco after the last of dinner was over and the silent tension dissipated with the wordless departures of several at the table. He'd looked like he hadn't known what to do with the offer, nor with her, and only looked more lost as she tried to make pleasant conversation as she cleared the table for him. She assured him that he'd done well with the food, even if Connie had only poked idly at his plate.

She wanted to talk with Connie— he'd been really distressed! —but Quiet pulled him away at the first opportunity. She hoped the two of them were okay. She didn't know what to make of the conflict at the dinner table, before the scary bout of silence, beyond the fact that she didn't like one bit of it. Cain promised her he wouldn't be mean to anyone anymore, but according to Connie, that was far from the case. Did Cain not know he was being mean? Like he didn't know he was hurting Quiet? She couldn't blame him for being attracted to their wings, they *were* very pretty, but he really should ask!

Maybe he hadn't learned those manners yet. Harri had promised Tabi he'd be the one to talk to him. He seemed very sure of his plan of action, even if Tabi had her reservations and whispered them very forcefully at him for a very long time. Cain and Harri seemed to get along; Dami hoped the talk coming from a friend would help Cain understand a little better. He'd stop, right? Eventually? He hadn't spoken a word to her since before they had gone back!... Not even a passing greeting. Or even much acknowledgement at all...

That was good! It showed he could improve. Even if it was jarring, how he'd all but disappeared in the night. Maybe she'd said something wrong. He might've been upset with her... *Oh no...*

But! That could wait until later! She had to get her mind off things!

She'd checked in with Winnie twice. Eerily still in her bed. Ciro asked her, the second time, if she thought Winnie looked okay.

"I think so, yeah! She's resting really well," Dami said in as chipper a voice as she could muster, reaching over to fluff Winnie's pillow and tuck her in a little better. She didn't stir at all; upsetting, when Winnie was often so aware, even in her deepest dreams, so even the slightest breeze would wake her. Still, Dami clasped her hands at her front and smiled easily at Ciro's dumbfounded expression. "You're doing your best, and that's what matters! Winnie's tough, she can pull through anything."

After all, why let him worry about details like that? He looked tired enough as it was, worn ragged with worry. Dami was glad Winnie made a good friend, even if she didn't know it yet.

Dami would readily, openly admit that she'd been *relieved* to catch Ava at a good time. She was apprehensive about asking, but she really didn't need to be, in hindsight. Ava liked this sort of thing! Especially if Dami gave her input. She needed a good project, something she could do and look forward to, something to make her feel useful.

"Dami, you're a brilliant star, you absolute genius!" Ava agreed to the plan immediately.

The state of Quiet's room had been bugging Dami ever since she first saw it. Ava too, apparently. It was just too sad! A room's decoration should be a reflection of its resident, to

make them feel at home and put them at ease; Dami always felt better walking into her and Tabi's shared room, back at the... other place they'd stayed. But she didn't know much about what Quiet liked or disliked. He was so private. So secretive!

(She imagined Winnie would like sleuthing to uncover some of those secrets for herself... When she woke up, she'd let her in on the secret mission!)

One thing she was *certain* he liked... were his friends. And who else would be a better group to ask, on how to cheer him up, than the people who'd been living with him from the start?

It would just take some careful planning, was all.

One step in front of the other, down the hall. He'd make it there soon enough; but, first, he would recount the steps of the following procedure.

Harrier Occhipinti was no fool. He was a single-minded edge, sharpened to a point and pristine as the day he hatched, driven in his goals and focused in his intent. He walked with purpose and a pre-determined plan, silent potential energy building by the second; he'd had a *lot* of time to think in a basement at the end of the world, and not one moment did he allow himself to stagnate into complacency.

That's where the others were so consistently wrong with him. He didn't defend Cain because he was stupid; Harri was *far* from stupid. He knew the risks, the costs, but he also knew the benefits, the reward: a soft blade would cut no one from their shackles, and they couldn't wait eons for a free escape anymore. A grinding stone was sure to shave off material, but at least he could cut through the noise with the sound filtered as it was. Human hearing was a privilege he'd earn when the danger had passed. Quiet needed all the help he could give. Every instant he was overwhelmed by a personal crisis was an instant he failed to catch another inconsistency, a lie, a clue pointing to the truth of the matter buried under the rubble and decay of an eroded will. Somewhere in all these chapters was Quiet's story and he had to be the one to dig out the tunnel. It was his only discipline.

Cain was more than an acquaintance or a companion; Cain was an asset, as important as the rest of them. They both knew a thing or two about tangles with eternity. Cain found a useful way to cope. Quiet wouldn't take it, and Harri knew it was best in moderation. (He couldn't recall much of the night beyond the mask and the hand that reached up to take it down, he was working off a patchwork puzzle of third party testimonies and a transcription of notes in a handwriting so shaky he couldn't quite identify it as his own.) But it remained useful regardless. If kept in check.

This was his cue to ring in the first check. The interpersonal drama was not the clue-in; no matter what the others said, ~~or the stuttering of Connie's breath and the way he'd begun to remind Harri more of Paco than himself~~, it was all par for the course. They'd driven each other up the walls with or without the realities beyond comprehension trapped inside an electronic box begging their attention. (Mental checks would have to come in soon. Some would be easier to wrangle in for compliance with the order than others. He doubted Oleander would want to have a sit down and a long talk about his *feelings*. Fernando was the softer type, universally adored by the majority; he'd be a better head of operation, assuming

he and Fer would be on good enough terms by the time he suggested it. The young man had a streak of forgiving without forgetting; a good habit, like the good head he had on his shoulders, but bad for Harri in his current social standing. A known risk of associating with such a divisive character.) No, the clue-in was the change in behavior. Cain had learned agency and was starting to exercise it. He was no Decider; he chose his actions poorly.

The chapter with 'Thorn' had been a good red flag to catch. He didn't expect Cain to develop so quickly, but him being so unsubtle with his movements was consistent to the character profile Harri had built of him insofar. A reassurance the others wouldn't understand, of course, that made Cain all the easier to trust. He didn't have the sense of ethics to *care* to stop the others from seeing the bad things he did. Point being: Cain acted before he thought, and that included thoughts of *others* and how their desires might conflict with his own. A boundary, Cain wouldn't grasp. But he had other ways of communicating.

And communicate he would, before Cain eroded all the good will of the house all by himself. Down the hall, to the right.

Harri knocked before entering Cain's room—it was polite, which they'd both appreciate—but entered without waiting for a response, for multiple reasons. For one, Harri needed to assert authority and control over the interaction as efficiently as possible to increase the chances of its effectiveness in obtaining the outcome he found favorable. For two, Harri doubted Cain was the type to entertain visitors or play host, which meant he'd be waiting outside the door for a response a long time if not forever. And, finally, for three: Harri believed with a high estimate of probability that Cain was probably asleep; he just *didn't* stay alone, ever, as far as Harri had observed, and if he were awake and aware he *would* have been attracted to the commotion of the confrontation outside.

For the most part, Harri's hypotheses proved correct.

Cain's room: Harri had not been in it before. He doubted most, beyond Cain himself—and he did so rarely retire here, that Harri sometimes wondered if he slept at all—wouldn't say the same. It was more decorated than Quiet's, which wasn't a difficult task by any margin, but the nature of the decoration was not as Harri expected. Cain didn't express many, if any—and Harri did not recall many, despite the long conversations he'd entertained with the man—interests. His room reflected as much. Cain was not particularly emotive. His room reflected that lack of expression. It was a pragmatic arrangement of items: the most direct path from bedroom door to bed, an open closet with outfits neatly arranged so as to be easily exchanged and worn between days, and a clear floor. But the flooring, the walls... if Harri looked up, the ceiling, it...

It was *varied*, was the best word to describe it. In texture, in shape, in contour, in color. As much difference, contrast, could be contained in a space. He could not see it, but it was evident Cain had taken to trying to diffuse scents into the space; oils, perfumes, air fresheners—from the smell of it, multiple at once. There was something distinctive at the top note, something spiced yet sweet and oddly warm for the admittedly chilled air of the room, though Harri could not identify it, coagulated with something floral and something chemical and something aged. On one of the walls, it caught his eye, there was a diagram: astronomical charts? Harri wondered if it was something Tabi would be interested in. He

doubted Cain cared for it more than something interesting to look at; but he had better things to concern himself with than the oddly easy-to-tune out visual noise of the setup.

Straight ahead, laying on his bed, was Cain himself.

His eyes were open. Harri nearly spoke prematurely, doubting himself, but realized—no, Cain *was* asleep, his eyes just hadn't closed. They stared up at the ceiling (Harri turned to look, wondering, and saw it painted black), unblinking, unseeing, so blue it would be a common mistake to think there was no color in them at all.

For a moment, he wondered *how* to wake him. How the light didn't rouse him. How the noise hadn't, either. His eyes roamed around the searing collection of textures and colors. It seems his plan had to be adjusted; he'd have to lay on hands immediately, swapping phases of consultation. Not a problem too complex to be solved, but trickier than he would've preferred. He could only work with what he could control, though. He'd scold himself for not considering this detail later.

He placed his hand on Cain's shoulder, fingers hurting at once from the bolt of cold shooting its way up his arm. He had been expecting that to be enough for him to come back to the world of the living, but Harri had become too accustomed to the likes of Paco or Quiet; able to wake at the slightest shift in the air.

Cain, clearly, had no such problems. He didn't even twitch, and Harri had half a mind to look for his pulse, so still and frigid he was. In lieu of that, he shook him lightly. Then harder, fingers stiff. ~~Intangible. Unreal.~~ Cain was so cold yet Harri was the one going through rigor mortis. No reaction. His glasses were almost sliding off his face with the force he was using.

Then his arm went numb. A flash-freeze, one instant chilled but not yet a concern, the next as if he had no arm at all. It took him a moment to recognize the how, Cain's hand having shot up between blinks to snatch Harri's wrist and bind it in place.

He didn't *look* any more aware than he did previously, was what Harri noted despite the way Cain's head shifted to look in Harri's direction, and despite even the way his eyes rolled to make proper eye contact. The shock passed and Harri was made aware of just how hard Cain had grabbed him, and was holding him still. Harri pulled back with all the mobility he was afforded—not much—and the grip loosened, but did not pull away. Readjusted. Harri could feel his own pulse in the pressure point. ~~It hurt.~~ (Didn't it?)

Cain did not blink. But something did happen. "What are you doing here?" He asked, tone not correlating to the apparently deep sleep he'd been in. He sounded as if he'd been awake for hours. Or never slept in the first place.

It took another second for Harri to recognize the issue. He cleared his throat. "Let me go?"

How many heartbeats, until he did? He could've counted them in the ache of his wrist, had he known the measurement would matter in advance. ~~There was the slightest acceleration for a moment.~~ Regardless: he *did* let go, with a tilt of his head.

With the release came back feeling. He shook his hand as he pulled away, pins-and-needles lighting up, fingers almost pained by the return of regular sensation. His wrist hurt, maybe. Yes. There was a slight chance it would bruise.

He looked back at Cain, and didn't flinch. He'd sat up when he wasn't looking.

"You know you're supposed to sleep with the blankets on top of you, right?" Harri said, stalling a moment to regain his bearings.

"Why?"

Cain's eccentricities did often baffle him. "Because... nevermind," he dismissed, shaking his head. "I'm not here for that."

Cain didn't dignify him with a follow-up question. That was fine, he knew how Harri was when he got going. And he needed to tell him some truths.

"They talked about you at dinner," he started with.

Cain didn't react, beyond a brief quirk of his lip. "They talked about me at breakfast."

Maybe Cain hadn't woken up all the way yet. "...I know. I was there."

"As was I."

What was he doing, this was bordering on smalltalk, and they both knew Harri didn't do things like that. There was a lull of silence, frustration with frivolous formalities stealing Harri's words a moment.

"Do you have anything else to say?" Cain prompted, tone a bored drawl.

"Connie told me what you did to Quiet."

That got his attention. He leaned forward, almost automatically, hands brought forward into his lap. "What about it?"

Tic, tac, boom. "You know they don't like people touching their wings."

"He's never said that."

"I'm the myopic one, not you," Harri complained, then shook his head. "Doesn't matter, you can't do things like that! I stood up for you and was told you did *that*, made me look like a fool! Why did you do that?!"

"Something new to examine. I thought you'd want to know," Cain paused, tilting his head again, his lidded eyes opening just a fraction as he regarded Harri in the low light, "what he was like."

He had not needed to know. It was far, so far, from his main priority. In every regard, it was not needed to know; the question was on the anatomical end, the strain, the maintenance, the

health and hygiene. Medical examination required a baseline, but the things examined instrumentally were not needed to be known intimately. The feathers would molt at some point. There were too many unknowns that didn't require putting hands on them.

Was he curious? The others, at varying potentials. *Him?*

He had not needed to know, but Cain thought he'd like to, anyway.

“‘Interesting’ is enough for me.” Cain shrugged. “But more details suffice for you. It's no different from how you study.”

It was, apparently, all Cain had to say on the matter. ~~Something picked at his sensibilities. The need to press at an inconsistency, a lie. He hated being lied to. He'd had enough of it from the place he came from, and the truth that'd been hidden from him then was the same truth they were all suffering for the sake of finding now.~~ Those cold eyes regarded Harri as they did on any other day, just as in any other context, utterly disaffected from the situation Harri was currently dealing with. His explanation for his actions were mundane, uncaring; as if he weighed it as nothing, even after being told it was wrong. It was everything Harri had come to expect of Cain, besides the consideration for Harri himself.

~~It was maddening.~~

~~Did he not see? Not understand? Grasp the severity of the stakes at hand?~~

"I didn't ask," Harri told him.

"You didn't need to," Cain replied.

~~Giving into impulsivity wasn't the rational way to go about things, but—~~

“You'll explain it to me now! What did you do?—” Harri snapped; Cain moved as if to push forward, only for Harri to cut him off with a raised hand, “—*I'm fine, blood pressure's a little high but that's all.* What did you do? What ***did*** you do?! I gave you a chance, I keep defending you and the problem is you. What is this? Talk!”

“I—“

“*Don't talk!* I gave you two chances, what was the first? Let's think, *what was it?*” Harri's words escaped his mouth faster than they could be properly heard.

He gestured wildly around him, rising with the momentum, standing and pacing the floor with a rush of energy. He felt warm, almost hot, in the cold room — a burning ember in a frigid landscape. Cain tracked his pacing, tilted head giving him an infuriatingly curious look. “I gave you a chance and you *blew it*, and now I'm hearing about something that happened with a *car?!?*”

Cain's face twitched, shifting to an expression normal people didn't wear—~~couldn't wear, in fact~~—and so couldn't be identified by normal metrics. He spoke in the tone of a smile, almost *too calm*. “Will you let me explain?”

“Hablá,” Harri agreed, again putting his hand up, as if blocking the man from view. He looked to his own hands as he recounted. “When we first got here you caused a car crash, and what do you do now? Beyond all this here, what am I to hear? Outside, on the streets, in the news. You blow up a car! *What’s the matter with you and cars?!*”

“I had nothing to do with that.”

And, silence.

Yes, his wrist *did* hurt, he decided. The flapping of his arms had irritated it worse.

“...Okay,” Harrier managed a breath, “maybe it was my mistake, maybe I assumed.”

The point of everything was, “we’ll both get kicked out if you keep doing things like that!”

Quiet’s wings, the thing with Connie, the neighbour’s car... a myriad of things Cain had, if not started, then helped along. ~~Something missing, a throughline; where was the line of reasoning, here? Nothing happens without reason, no effect is brought into being without cause.~~

Cain’s head righted itself as he leaned back, sitting straight again. His expression discolored into its usual resting monotone, voice dipping in disinterest. “No.”

Harri nearly choked in his words ~~and outrage~~, needing a moment to breathe. Which was why it surprised him when Cain didn’t wait for his reply.

“That will never happen,” Cain said flatly. His stare pierced through Harri’s soul. “There’s no reason to believe it would. There’s no point in stressing over an impossibility.”

“We never thought someone would get kicked out in the first place,” Harri reminded him.

“If you’re adamant on burdening yourself,” Cain sighed. “I’m at no risk of being ‘kicked out,’ as you say. The Decider needs me. You never had to ‘defend’ me. I never asked you to.”

“But we’re—” ~~the word was stuck~~ he opted to rephrase— “we spend time together, I’m guilty by association,” Harri reasoned, something bitter in his throat. “If I don’t defend you, I fail to defend myself.”

“I wouldn’t defend you,” Cain said, easily, and Harri knew it to be true just as readily in response. Despite the objectivity of the statement, he had a moment to feel stricken. “You don’t need it.”

A moment to process the words, unrelated to the headache forming behind his eyes. The last few hours had been too full of new things to take note of, things he hadn’t been aware of. It was a lot to take in all at once. Those words were too far behind in the queue to reach him now.

Exhausted, Harri slumped. It was habit that had him settle down, sit beside Cain and look away from him, stare at the far wall. There was familiarity in the position, for him. The warmth that had enveloped him for a few moments was winding down. Idly, he examined his

wrist, turning it over, as his sluggish mind tried to do the same with the day's events. Too heavy to lift the same way.

He glanced back to the wall. Walls, plural; the cacophony of decorations without semblance of reason, without care put into the meaning of their placement. The smells which became harder to identify the longer he spent submerged in them. Nose blindness, he had to guess. The air here was cold. This room was not habitable. It functioned, but only by technicality. How could Cain stand it?

"I'm tired," he admitted.

There was a pause. If he focused, maybe, a low... something, not a noise. He didn't have focus left in him. The silence, for what it was worth, was deafening. Too still. He felt vaguely aware of his head starting to drop.

His head raised. It felt heavy, heavy like his eyes, weighted down. That was familiar, in its own way, too; weight at his neck, staring and waiting for the room to change. His head was being pushed up by a force beneath his chin. He turned to its origin, Cain staring as idly as ever.

His hand did not remove itself from Harrier's face. He was closer than he was before. Harri might have been able to see his breathing, if he were breathing deeply enough, but all the evidence he could use to hypothesize with was the sense of a chill spreading through his jaw and the air in his mouth.

Cain's stare gained new focus. Words came from him. Somehow. *"Let's keep you sharp. The others are soft enough."*

Grey on blue. Grey on black. There was nothing else to see.

...

...

...

It was cold. That was all it was.

...

...

...

And: done. ~~Nothing left to take.~~

The burden of desensitization should have stung; instead, the numbing of his feelings left him just heavy. Deeply settled into every part of his body at rest. Pinned to his seat by the weight of his own body. No reason to move. No need. Not yet.

The weight shifted; it was not his head that was heavy, that pulled it down alongside his eyelids. The weight was inside his head, a mass of indeterminate texture. Not soft, not harsh. Pervasive, certainly. Like a progressing fog, locking away that which did not concern him and would no longer.

It was easier this way. His wrist felt fine. *He* felt fine. Better, even. Easier to think, prioritize, consider... this absence was all he needed to be feeling, at the moment. The world was static and background noise until the next data point found him, and he it, and he did what was required of him. On a drifting search for progress and objective information, floating just above the ground, surrounded by the chill of open, empty air.

He was done here. He'd come in and said all he needed to, he decided. If there was a ~~tug somewhere within him, it didn't last long, a fleeting spark lost between one second and the next~~. Unimportant. He had other matters to attend to, after all.

There was nothing to be concerned about, after all.

He nodded, imperceptibly. Cain withdrew his hands from his skull, leaning back. The room sharpened in clarity, movements fast-slow, peripheral sense heightened and central vision unfocused. No risk of tunnel vision, then. Gravity was lesser here. He felt like he had walked into another layer of the atmosphere.

So strange. He felt so strange. Unlike any other feeling in the world. But the most useful thing he could feel, nevertheless.

Idly, he wondered if he should, *could*, do something for Cain in return. It wasn't strictly necessary, but... it would be courteous. Cain did seem to appreciate courtesy, after all.

Well, that was one thing he could do. "Thank you."

Again, that tone like a smile. "Of course."

[The Bird ran. Over roots, under branches, into the forest deep, and hid deep in a cave.]

[The Bird wasn't careful.]

[Its injury could make a trail.]

Quiet wasn't sure how to proceed.

There was blood on his sheets. Not much, just a smear... thick, dark, but covering little surface area. To the side, the side he'd climb into bed on, closer to the middle of its length than either the end or the headboard. He didn't know whose blood it was.

It wasn't anywhere close to the most shocking thing Quiet had ever been through. He'd been through too much for any sort of gore in any context to unsettle him, let alone scare him. And beyond it, he'd been shocked in far worse ways. It was just another thing. Outside, the grass was green and the skies were clear. And inside, locked in there, there was blood on his sheets.

It wasn't very important news. Still, he wasn't sure where to go from here. He was tired. Before, when he'd first walked into this place he called his room, it'd been a warm sort of tiredness; a sort of readiness to rest he had not felt for a week or so. That warmth was pressed from his extremities once he'd passed through the doorway, replaced by a sort of heavy chill setting into his stomach at the sight of his living space.

Still, the warmth was retained in his core. A part of his heart felt light, happy even, despite what he had learned: all that had happened under his nose and which he hadn't noticed until after, until it was too late. And despite the displacement he felt so alone and empty in a room that echoed his thoughts and made his wings feel tight in such a confined space...

They worried for him. A selfish part of him couldn't help but warm at the thought.

This was the largest bedroom in the house. And they'd forced him to take it, because they wanted him to have it, and because they thought he'd earned it. Or "deserved" it. They wanted him safe, and happy, in so very many ways. They did not want him to hurt. How could he not feel good?

How could he reconcile it with...?

[The Bird left its cave...]

He'd never seen it dry. He had no real confirmation it was blood... but he knew. It was deep-set into his gut. Too known to skirt around. Half-hearted attempts to think otherwise fizzled and died before he'd even started. It was blood. He didn't have to ask himself how he knew.

He didn't have to ask himself anything.

He just had to act.

He didn't have an answer on the rest. Just that it was blood. He was familiar enough with it by experience, he reasoned to himself, that he could identify it on sight alone, dried or not.

The sight of it did not frighten or shock or scare him. It was with the cold dread of acceptance that he took it in, acknowledged it, regarded it for what it was. He *knew* it was blood. He *assumed*, after a long, silent pause, that it was most likely his own. How to deal with this without worrying the others, now, without *making them worry about him even more* (selfish, why keep doing this to them)?

[...Went to the lake...]

The answer was easy: put the sheets to wash. He wasn't too sure how to clean blood (was it to put it under cold or hot water?). It would be laundry day in two days, anyway. He could sneak it through. It'd be fine. No one would have to see.

He gathered his sheets into a ball and walked out of the room, past the doors, past the kitchen. He knew the layout of the house by heart, didn't even have to turn on the lights. He would dump the sheets in the first laundry basket he could find.

Then, all he'd have to do would be to get other sheets and go to bed properly. Close his eyes, now that he could, until the next morning. Linger. Indulge.

He turned the corner. There, in the far distance, at the end of the hall, stood a spectre. Silent and still, eyes wide, first searching for and then watching him. She held the thread binding them together like she had followed it to him. It looped loosely around her wrist.

The smile on her face conveyed one thing, as ancient as it was new between them both, a long and short intimacy as deep as it was unexplored.

(Relief) Quiet.

[And met a Wolf.]

It smoothly transitioned into something lighter. Less serious, more curious and playful.

She stood a fair distance away. Quiet did not startle at the sight of her, though a slight alarm flickered at the back of his head for having been caught, quickly transferring to annoyance. He was trying to *avoid* explaining himself, here!

She drifted, slowly, to him. That wasn't to say she was unnoticeable, not with the way goosebumps broke out in his skin. She drifted like burrs and leaves did on autumnal winds, easygoing and light with the slightest of comforting chills. He tensed infinitesimally at her approach, not wanting her to catch wind of the incriminating evidence; not wanting that sweet expression to be wiped off her face.

Maybe he could say he went to get water, got turned around...? If she didn't comment on it, he wouldn't either.

She stalled in the air, as she was, twirling in her own momentum and curtsying in the air. Her playful grin did not match the care bleeding through their connection, the intimacy in her rituals. "Where'd you sneak off to, killer? Tucking in all by yourself?"

Spin, around the shoulders, behind his back. She did not graze him as she'd done before, the signature prickling of frost not rap-tap-tapping on his skin.

He stammered, trying to find anything to say. Oleander was not here to help his tongue find the right syllables to say what he needed to. "Uh, I— yeah, that is what I am doing, uh-huh."

Grace circled around to his front, giving him a once-over. He winced. She looked down at the sheets in his hands, delicately folded over so as to hide his secret.

A breath. Then, the simplest of smiles as she pulled her shoulder's up in a cocky little grin. "Killer, there's no need to worry about dirty sheets; they won't stay clean for long with us tangled up in them."

Confusion stilled his movements; she took the lead in their little dance. He followed her movements with his head. Watching.

"Ghosts and sheets are a pretty pair," Grace giggled, pulling back and finding herself by Quiet's side with a wide crescent twirl. "Though I think you and I might compete."

Her voice was lower; a certain *tone* that had the hairs at the base of his neck standing up.

"After such a long day, don't you think?" She swam through the air in front of him, leaning in so their noses would touch if she had one yet. Something familiar flickered in her gaze. Hunger? "Don't you think it'd be nice to sleep together?"

Quiet's neck moved as if to pull back. He stopped himself as it clicked.

Right. Nothing to be expected. This was right in routine.

That's right. That's what she wanted. That's what She always wanted. Quiet didn't understand how he let himself hope— think diff— *fall into delusion* like that. Of course. She must have been wanting this, if not from the start, then for a while. She wanted his body, to use and amuse herself with, to treat as an object and a joke. She would take it even if he said no. That was how it went.

It hurt. It always did, but this time was different. It was different because, before, then, and now, it really did feel different this time, this way. It felt like she was here for him, not in the sense of him being an object to take, but a person to comfort. To connect to and empathize with. Being with her had felt... the thread he had given her felt...

...but it was fine.

It wasn't like that for her. It was fine.

He'd let her. It was the least he could do, as her killer. This was making it up to her. He didn't know how much he had left to sacrifice, but she'd wanted "everything he thought was him." Okay. That was fine. She could have 'him.' She could. She *could*.

It wasn't like he didn't have practice, anyway.

Contrary to what he had expected, she had frozen. Nothing in her moving, nothing but her eyes. Wide. Wider. Trembling. A mouth open but with no noise to accompany it. Somehow, somehow, she had grown paler.

Horror flooded their connection. Thoughts—

*No, n— didn't mean— just wanted— matter just as much as— not what I wanted— meant, I—
should've known b— but I— I shouldn't have—*

—hisnothisnothiswhose—

*Careless of me, I'm— sorry, you shouldn't— what was I thinking, I— wasn't— so worried
about everyone else, not watching— should've hesitated—*

—hers?—

—slithering in his mind, some rotting, some taking root. Too jumbled to parse, panicked and molding together into a slurry. He could recognize the tone, half self loathing half apologetic.

His eyebrows shot *right* up. That wasn't right. What was *she* doing apologizing, the Princess that most deserved an apology from him? The one he had permanently hurt?

Logic finally made his thoughts start again. Grace was sort-of-a-ghost. Not quite corporeal.

She meant possession. *She meant possession*. She had asked before possessing him before, this was just more of the same. It didn't even hurt now, he knew, he had done it before. It'd felt right—

No, he was right the first time, about that much at least. It wasn't the same for her.

"I didn't mean it like that," Grace managed beneath her breath, barely a whisper.

"I know," Quiet agreed, voice low but easygoing; routine is practiced, after all. "It's okay, I understand."

"No— didn't mean it like that either," if anything, she looked more panicked, chest rising and falling. Zipping erratically across the room, left to right. That was his cue; he had to get ready. "I can't be alone— I shouldn't have said— and, and I can't take it back, there's nothing I can do to make it up to you, but I really, *really* didn't mean to, to— I just—"

Memories behind his eyes. Tears trailing down cheeks and the rupturing of a crushed heart.

Grace crumbled, like the heart was hers, broken before her. Did she feel it? Was it worse than the pain he'd already inflicted on her? How much could she take, before he'd done enough damage as it was? "*You*, killer, you're more important than any of the rest of it. I, I need— I really need you to know it's important to me too. So, so important, all of it, all of you. I'd never take you— I don't *want* to take you or what you've done for granted."

His sight conflated. What was behind his eyes and what was in front of him contradicted.

His eyes were fluent in Her and Her many eyes. How She followed him like a lion stalking her prey — a spider ready to catch a moth. Hungry, shining, full of pure need. He'd felt that fear and attention and undivided, devoted, demanding *love* deep to the bone. She'd drilled its meaning into him and branded onto him its design; every surface covered, every vessel filled.

Every molecule, every thread of his in permanent use past the point of fraying.

It was funny, how sometimes he sought touch and other times he couldn't bear even a graze from anyone. Was he a contradiction too?

He'd never been more connected to anyone in his life. He'd never understand anyone quite as well as he understood Her. She would never be replaced. Never be forgotten. Never be absent. (And yet, he wanted to say, She never understood him at all.)

His eyes were fluent in Her and yet... now, he couldn't read Grace at all.

[She tucked her matted tail like the Bird did its battered wings. Neither had any need to run.]

Relief.

He didn't know relief could hurt. His knees felt weak, buckling — *au* — as it pumped through his veins. The floor was brought much closer to him, all of a sudden. His blood-soaked past and bloodstained present collected in the wrinkle lines of his palms, sheets still firmly bound in his hands.

Right. Not there. Not Her. The Princesses weren't Her. There was a reason why he kept the names all this time.

Grace wasn't Her, was the furthest thing away from it. She was *apologizing*. For something as simple as *saying the wrong thing*? It was always on him to understand; if he didn't like what she had to say, it was on him for choosing to interpret her words poorly. He was being willfully obtuse when she was being more than clear enough. It was his choice to suffer rather than embrace the beauty of the moment.

And Grace was apologizing for unintentionally making him suffer. An entelechy. Something unreal, or as far removed from the situation Quiet expected. He didn't know how he had given a thread to the oddest princess he had ever met, but he didn't regret it.

If he could only figure out how he'd done it at all, he'd give more. Wasn't that odd?

[Together, the Bird and the Wolf made a pact.]

"It's funny," Quiet found his voice, light and airy as it was. Despite the lack of substance he'd started with, Grace had all but froze in place once he spoke up. He raised his voice with only slight hesitation, just to speaking level. Enough to be heard, since for some odd reason or another, Grace tended to listen where She always lectured. "All of me, She'd put to use every last string of me through all our time together." She wasn't there. Grace was right, he had left Her. So, without fear of correction, he could say, "It was terrible. I hated it. And yet... I think I sometimes want to offer my threads up. I never want to be *so* close to anyone ever again, but I do want to be *close*. Close enough to know, and to be known, just in ways where it's also known where I end and begin. That must still be an option."

['Keep me safe,' the Bird asked the Wolf, 'from the moving shadows in my cave.']

More silence, enough that a part of Quiet wanted to check if she was still breathing. It wasn't even a ridiculous thought, given everything.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not completely innocent. The first time we met, I killed you," Quiet reminded her. "That outweighs anything you could ever do to me. Even now. *Epecially* now. Of all people, *you* have the least to apologize for. I'm the one who's sorry."

"What are *you* apologizing for? Killing me isn't an answer, you already apologized before," Grace huffed. "You gave us *both* a second chance. In so many ways."

A second chance only required because the first of his was squandered when he took her one and only. He had everything to apologize for. He needed to. He'd been unable to with Her; She didn't believe either of them had anything to apologize for. But with each passing moment, the silent pressure of untold guilt atrophied his bones and thinned his skin.

Excuses made in belief of the good of his nature only made him feel all the worse for betraying that trust in the first place. Second chances only followed initial failures. And he'd failed so many.

['The only thing I ask in return,' the Wolf asked the Bird, 'is your company.']

"I, killer, apologized because I butchered my delivery of 'can I sleep on your bed tonight.'"

...Let it be known and let the records show that Quiet was an idiot, sometimes. His thoughts twisted themselves into knots, sometimes. Thought too much or too little, sometimes. Misinterpreted a situation incredibly badly, sometimes.

"I wanted to know if the living could 'sleep like the dead' or better."

And he didn't want to be alone. He couldn't. Grace didn't want to, either. *She* couldn't, either. The one thing they might have in common.

"You're developing bad habits," Quiet huffed, and felt his wings behind him relax with the release of tension. He brushed past her idly to drop off his sheets down the hall, taking advantage of the distraction of her embarrassment, and picked up a new set. He gestured idly with his only two free limbs, motioning in the direction he was walking, goading her to follow. "We'll have to fix your *phrasing* issues."

"I can do that myself. You don't have to worry."

Was that how it felt like, dealing with him? "Not right now," he agreed. "Right now, I wanna test your theory."

It was a serene peace that embodied her; that she embodied; embodying that which is embodying that which is... the circles spun, neverending, in on themselves. Rings in trees and golden ratios in wood, doomed to repeat themselves without end or resolution.

It spread, searching for something. She let it. It pressed against, then through, the contour of her mind; she felt it as though it were herself, and she knew it all the same. She didn't mind it; or anything... all of it, helping her to become something truly at...

Peace. Everywhere at once, it holding her and she holding it, extensions running through and over her. There was no place it ended and she began; it was merely the start of a new beginning.

Hope, tattered though it might have been, bloomed across their landscape; along what once could've been bones, now simply mineral deposits to be taken in for seedlings and new opportunities and second chances. It was picturesque, the very definition of...

Beauty. They fell inward, deeper, into a network of connections too vast for their old mind to occupy; into themselves, unable to grasp even the fuzziest connections of that which define them. Beyond definition. Beyond the bindings of logic. Beyond the trappings of bodies. It pulled her deeper in, and her troubles fell away with her. All so small. All so petty. A deep breath. A final breath.

It caught in her throat, and her attention with it. A static in the air, sickly sweet, almost cloying. Particles of something in the air, buzzing with an energy like wind, but faster, always moving, burning up. Something strange. Something twisted around. Something inspiring...

Curiosity. The need to explore past the boundaries of the dream, to grow, to take in what remained of the worlds beyond... hesitation. Growing pains, stretching, mass buried beneath them both struggling free of its bindings; a premature rebirth. Resistance.

They stirred in her wound-sleep, drawn to the discrepancy. Not like dirt, or soil, or the wax on leaves or the dew on grass or rotting carcasses buried beneath the ground. Different from them, something other. The contradiction called to their nature, but as she pulled away from the network's embrace, it grasped her tighter, something like pain flickering through their peripherals as nerves lit and burned with visions of violence.

They felt something deep within the forest's core. A heartbeat. A steady horror that grew louder with her attention. The Wild screamed at her. Winnie's heartbeat turned frantic, terrified, as she thrashed with renewed self-preservation against her bindings.

AGONY. COLD. PARALYSIS, A SHATTERED SPINE AND ROTTING AWAY AT THE BOTTOM OF A HOVEL IN THE DIRT. DECOMPOSITION IN AN OLD, OLD TOMB. 'DON'T LOOK AT IT!'

Hurt. Betrayal. Pinned to the floor by a knife in the back, dragging fingers across stone in search of purchase, roots burrowing through brick. Something constricted around her. A trap in the shape of comfort, a cage in the guise of a garden, a cradle grown from a grave, an embrace which forbid her movement. 'Please. It hurts outside, the other only hurts. We'll fall apart if we don't stick together. We're safe like this. Don't you feel it? This is what we need to be.'

Hatred. Spite. Winnie screamed back. 'Not again, I'm not going back again, LET ME GO—!'

ANGER. BITTERNESS. THE SLOW CRUSHING OF A FRAGILE VESSEL. 'THIS IS WHAT WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE!'

The Wild was hurting her again; all the better, since it was hurting itself, too. Winnie grit her teeth and focused, gathering all she could of her intention. *'I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I—'*

Sensations rolled through her: spindling fraying like that of unraveling a seam; rich pains of skin being split open in cavernous gashes; the stinging-sweet burning of fresh air dug out from below; a great release as the burden of the world and the pressure of its hold is lifted

from her shoulders; the relief of mobility in unstable, weak limbs; ripping; tearing; clawing; biting; the vertigo of freefall from a dream—

—falling—

—through a web of nerves she never knew—

—and a burning righteousness in her veins. Rage pumping in her heart alongside her lifeblood. A yell torn from an undamaged throat, “I hate her! I hate her!”

Feet kicking blankets up and away. Air. Room to breathe. An unfamiliar ceiling over an unfamiliar bed under unfamiliar blankets and an unfamiliar pillow she threw to a not-so-unfamiliar person.

Her hands ran up and down her arms, her face. Wholly herself again. Rather than cold, she was burning up. Rather than a vague, foggy sense of paralysis or the tempting bliss of enforced ignorance, Winnie felt the usual pains and aches of a real body.

Her skin was tight and calloused on her arms, hardened by cauterization. She looked down to see no roots binding her, no buds sprouting from her, and no fresh cuts endlessly spouting blood which refused to clot.

A certain ringing in her ears. A voice, distant, calling her name.

Herself again. She inhaled, deeply, balling her hands into fists, and continued to shout.

“Awful, sneaking, *gruesome thing!* What gives her the *right* to visit me after I’ve departed from her? I took my leave and I took it sneakingly, so she wouldn’t follow my trail. Still she sniffs me out like the creature she is, the beast, *the monster!* What a loathsome, nasty, vile thing she is! So utterly revolting! *Impossibly repugnant!*”

She felt it; she felt her own voice in her lungs, in her throat, expelling from her mouth. She felt the way her diaphragm expanded as she took in more air, felt the vibrations of the air in her mouth as she hissed and sputtered. Felt the trembling in her frame, all the way down to her fingertips. Felt so strongly she could do nothing else but honor it.

“It’s like my very soul *reeks* of hers,” she spat, raking her tongue against her teeth. She could still taste the blood in her mouth, feel the dirt under her nails, hear the remnants of song in her head.

Her nails were long and her teeth were sharp. Claws dug into soft fabric as the impulse to scream and the impulse to bite warred between her instinctual compulsions. Horrible. *Horrible!* She inhaled, and refused to stop her speech until she lost her breath, “that was horrible! Absolutely horrible and wretched! Feverish, just the thought of her makes me ill, and how sick in the head she must be to think we share even the slightest similarities! Like I would ever stoop as low as a creature like her, blind without eyes to watch and deaf without ears to listen. Just feelers like gnats and worms and bugs, fitting for the thing she is, *digging everywhere her nasty little claws can pry into!*”

Whoever was still calling her name would have to wait some more, she had more to say and more to do.

One won out between the two, for a moment. She paused her diatribe to lean down and bite a chunk out of whatever tired old blanket the others elected to grant her, ripping it from its seams and jerking back snappily, satisfactorily. She spit it out and kept on going, instinct satisfied and tail lashing behind her as she continued to unwind the woven threads with her claws, deepening the wound. She imagined it to be that thing that plagued her nightmares and hoped it was screaming back at her, wherever it might be.

She was tearing it apart, she knew. Ripping it in half, in quarters, in eighths. Good!

It shouldn't have been stitched together in the first place, Winnie decided! It shouldn't have been like that at all! Maybe all these pieces and tatters could make something of *themselves*, now that something stopped making itself out of them! She hoped it *hurt*!

Her throat hissed at her with stinging pains. Good, that meant she was alive, in her own body, with nothing making her forget. Her lungs screamed at her, tired and aching for having been overused. Her skin tugged at her, new scar tissue making itself known.

Someone not of hers was also vying for her attention, still. Enough that she could make out the words.

"Holy shit, calm d— holy *shit* stop—!"

The creaking of wood, the rustling of leaves. All around her.

Her heart seized, a scream trapped in her throat, the hair on her neck and arms standing on its ends as a great *energy* sought purchase of and escape through her body through whatever means necessary—

LET ME OUT.

The room— shifted— and *splintered*.

There was a resonant *cracking* sound as the wooden furniture across the room was bent and broken around her, repelled from her with a force so great it bordered on destruction, splinters jutting out from bookshelves like branches that proceeded to grow, spontaneously, new bark and knots and leaves of their own. Those shelves housed books they no longer had room for, heavy books, which were pushed out and slammed hard against the floor in rough falls which cracked their spines. Flowers growing, falling, growing again, showering the room in a storm of pink petals. Fruit growing, ripening, falling.

For a brief instant, when the sound of the explosion stopped and the last of the petals made their lazy descent through the air, things were almost... calm. Winnie heaved a couple much-needed breaths, reviewing her spontaneous work, her tail slowly batting behind her. *Ciro* wasn't looking anywhere but her. But, the sight of the destruction left in her wake was almost... gratifying, even... beautiful.

And then the remainders of the shelves imploded, collapsing in on themselves, unable to support their remodeled structures. Ciro flinched, spinning around to watch as the rubble fell apart around him. The ones that didn't, she noticed, had grown what appeared to be roots, embedded deeply into the walls.

"I'm not cleaning that up," she told Ciro as he took several long, backwards steps from Harri's side of the room. Her throat felt like it had needles growing from the inside. Her body felt cramped and tense.

"Shit," Ciro wheezed under his breath, spinning around to check on— not her, huh? Wasn't that so funny? He could spend a whole night sat at vigil beside her, and next thing she knew, he was more concerned with his pink pet. '*Axolotl*.'

Winnie winced. A slight pain lit up the side of her head, like a little jolt of lightning. She had no clue what an 'axolotl' was. Looking at the little malformed *thing* in the tank Ciro was fussing over wasn't helping her put a definition to the word. It had feathers around its head! And its limbs were stumpy and strange; one of them, one of the hind legs, so far up the body in comparison to its oddly-shaped tail, almost seemed ripped away and disjointed in comparison to the other. *No, wait. It...* Was it supposed to look like that?...

Ciro sucked in a breath through his teeth.

"Ta, ta, ya sé que duele," he chittered to it, voice a low, soft rumble, "me pasó algo parecido, pero leí que sos más duro de matar que nosotros. Ya te vas a mejorar."

She had been the one who almost died, thank you very much! Her tail nearly started lashing out her frustrations for her, but she willed herself to stay still and dignified as that fool over there scrambled for bottles of chemicals and things to treat the little creature's water with. His precision with how many drops of antiseptic he added to the tank was admirable, considering his shaking hands.

Then, finally, he seemed to remember someone else was in the room. He exhaled, turned to face her, and she awaited his attention. He stood as if haltingly taking in the present moment, arms barely raised from their resting position and eyes staring in a sort of quiet horror. Unable to stand truly shocked or with the rigid posture of fear, caught up and twisted in a conflicting relief. Mouth half-parted, still not saying anything. To her.

"I thought you didn't want to see me?" Winnie snarked to fill the silence.

And if he flinched at that, so what? He had said that, he didn't get to take it back just because she nearly died!

"No! I mean, *shit*," Ciro caught himself, "no, I *didn't* mean... Listen. I didn't want to see you like *that*."

"Taking control for once?"

"Losing control," Ciro corrected. Winnie's ears fell flat, unimpressed. "Just lashing out, at the *wrong* people and the wrong things, who did nothing to you and had no relation to anything

that happened. And... destroying yourself in the process, by the looks of it."

A vigil, for a sick and wounded heart. Left to watch, to see her so far below even her lowest point, and forced by the shackles of his perceived responsibility to tend to her at her least receptive.

Winnie's eyes flickered to the bandages on her body, how her skin felt tight. "That wasn't it."

"Bullshit," Ciro scoffed. Winnie bristled. "You really think you can brush this aside after you literally exploded? You're pissed, and that's great and all, but you're not going about it in a way that's helpful to anyone."

Winnie rolled her eyes. "Nice life lesson, wise guy, but there's something trickier at play than my heinous little attitudes. Something even more wretched than my life choices."

"The thing you were yelling about?"

"The thing that wanted to do something worse than kill me?" Winnie agreed, sitting up nice and proper. "It's a shame you weren't there to see it, the fine paste it ground me into by my lonesome. Quite the fitting end for a horrible thing like me, no?"

To his credit, Ciro managed to twist his expression into something remorseful as she went on.

"Don't you fret about me now! Don't you worry, it was more than willing to keep me company while the rest of you went about your petty business. In fact," Winnie cackled. "It wouldn't have left me alone at all, if it had its way! Back where I was meant to be, in its stolen eyes. It's just my nature, you see, to be *trapped*. To run in the dark, in circles, until something new comes along to snap me up."

"That's bullshit." Ciro went to a miraculously-intact table, coming back with—

Oh, she knew that smell and her stomach knew it too.

"Here," was all Ciro managed before Winnie snatched the treat from his hands. She guarded it from him, scooting away before he could steal it back. "You had some real shit timing, strudel was out of the oven by the time you got here. Dami saved you a slice."

Said strudel was already halfway gone. Apples. Cinnamon. Sweets and spice and everything nice. She'd have to steal Dami away at some point; one slice was just not enough.

"Yeah, that seems about right," Ciro commented, and Winnie ignored him. He was not the important element of the room right now. "I don't know what the hell you're going on about, but I've heard enough of that shit from Borja. Your 'nature,' you overdramatic puss, is—"

Winnie choked. She'd tried to say something to the effect of '*what did you just call me?!*' and inhaled pastry particles instead.

"—to eat that thing," Ciro kept going over her choking, unapologetic. He watched as she labored to swallow what'd gotten stuck and breathe through the rest. She blinked back tears. "¿Qué es este lamento? ¿Esta auto simpatía?"

She glared at him. She wished Dami were here so she'd know how he was insulting her. He had to be doing that on purpose.

"Ah, you are listening then," Ciro told her, then crouched down so he was talking to her at her eye level. How demeaning. "In case you haven't noticed, we— bar Oleander, but that's a whole other deal— haven't done shit to you, and fever dreams don't count. So how about you get over yourself and quit this... self-pity streak. And stop tearing up my bed. Find someone else's property to do that with."

Oh, she knew very well what, or who, she wanted to tear down with her bare hands. Bit out of reach, though. She wanted it to stay that way.

"There are few things I hate more than myself. But *that*... That loathsome wretch, I know it better than myself. It's a new sort of awful. Beyond anything I can aspire to be. Truly, terribly awful."

"Then we can hate her together," Ciro said at once. He walked, then, to her bedside as if trying to join her with her sitting. She wore her best scowl, refusing his company, refusing to make space for him. He squinted... and relented, settling down on the floor, content just to be near her, here in the room.

Hadn't he wasted enough of his time already? He'd sat on this dingy floor enough when it wasn't covered in splinters.

She tensed with the need to swat him away as he barely leaned in her direction, intent on keeping the conversation going. "You called it a 'she' earlier. That bitch better watch herself before she ends up in the dream of someone who won't take her shit. Should've learned her lesson from Fer."

She frowned. Recalled what she had learned about that, secondhand. "She didn't look like in the game. No hands, not a person. Just roots."

Ciro's gaze sharpened. "Roots...? Did they... look like anything *other* than roots?"

That was too broad to answer. "Like what..?"

"Like... our threads," Ciro motioned through the air as if pointing out an example invisible to her. "But 'wrong?'"

"Paco said that," came the automatic reply of knowledge known but never gained. Her tongue felt like static.

Ciro winced. "You were still conscious at that point?"

She'd said that aloud? Winnie shifted uncomfortably. "No," she said, and it was the truth. She shouldn't have known that. *She* didn't hear it. But, still: not an answer to the first question. "But that description could apply, if you were inclined to see them that way. I'd say, if we *had* to place those lowly things on a pedestal they didn't deserve, they were more like nerves than threads."

"Still counts," *Ciro* said. He covered his mouth with his hand a moment, then brought his two palms together in front of his face. Took a deep breath in, then out. His eyebrows furrowed. Then, that contemplative expression cleared as he closed his eyes and swallowed. He turned back to her with a tired sigh. "Alright. More bullshit beyond comprehension, why not, putting it in the pile. Are you feeling... better, after everything?"

She felt smaller. She felt *larger*. "I feel like myself again," she substituted, because that was correct. She flexed her hands for good measure, giving herself another once-over. When was the last time she hadn't seen green on her at all? "There's no one else I'd rather be."

"You and me both."

Footsteps outside the door, halting rhythm into a stumble as they passed through the doorway. Winnie glanced to see Harri, half hidden behind a gnarled sapling, staring at the wreckage in a sort of horrified awe.

Pain raced up in a bolt from the root of her neck, up to the back of her head, lingering in a centralized spot. She ducked her head in a harsh wince, biting back a hiss as her eye twitched. Huh, she really tore the comforter to shreds.

"How...? What did you *do*?" Harri half-asked, half-accused.

That shock was more animated than she'd been expecting; he hadn't been faring well, not long after... '*after*...?'

She brought a hand to her head in a futile attempt to stop it from hurting. Images like lightning flashed behind her eyelids. None of them from her own perspective. None of them able to be captured, not as she was. None she could comprehend except for a feeling, a certainty.

It was easy enough to see with how Harri was holding himself up, like something was crushing him, too.

He took a step forward, into the room, and the look in his eyes passed through into something not quite there. His gaze shifted from a certain living awe, blown wide with curiosity, scanning the room's wreckage with a thirst for understanding, into a dispassionate, passive acceptance of presented reality, eyelids drooping with a forced disinterest. An exhaustion pressed his shoulders down, and he walked.

He stepped over floorboards-turned-roots and brushed past furniture-turned-flora with a detached presence, as if floating above it. He crouched down and idly examined his fallen possessions without favoritism or higher concern, without any fear or panic to speak of. He moved like a ghost, she reckoned, with the same origin as any other in the house.

He would not like the comparison, so she thought it even harder.

Ciro was tense. Waiting, anticipating, ready to strike at the first raised voice or sudden movement. When that didn't come to pass, he coiled *more*.

Harri didn't say anything anymore. Didn't ask questions.

"Well?" Ciro prompted. A beat of silence. "Sorry for wrecking your shit."

"No hard feelings," he replied. "It's not important." Another beat, two. An anticipation.

Harri stopped reviewing the room, turning to the pair on Ciro's side of it. He stared at Winnie for a moment. Finally, he managed to say, "you're up now."

"What the fuck happened to you?"

"Nothing," Harri told them both, *lying*. Tabitha wouldn't like hearing about that. Winnie was absolutely telling her. "Is anything else happening with Winnie, besides... this new development?"

"No," she said, trying to get up by herself. "Nothing."

"That's good," Harri replied, sighing unsteadily. He glanced around the room again as Ciro stood, hovering in Winnie's space. She swatted at him; she was *perfectly ambulatory*, thank-you-very-much. "This will be a minor project to clean up."

"A *bitch* to clean up, you mean," Ciro offered.

"Yeah," Harri said. "Sure."

Winnie waking up provided relief that was a lot more short-lived than Dami had expected. One problem solved, another cropped up. At least she hadn't started blooming again. Dami wasn't sure if she'd be able to help again... her stomach clenched and her hands shook at the thought. (*She was sorry, she was sorry, so so sorry...*)

Anyway! Oli had barricaded himself in his room, and Dami made it her personal mission to find out what was with that.

Knock, knock! No response.

"I know you're in there!" Dami told the door. No response.

"Is there something wrong?" Dami asked the door. No response.

"If you tell me, I can help!" Dami offered the door. No response.

"Unless you're scared to?" Dami asked the door. Shuffling on the other side, but no further response. "It's okay, I was startled too. It was a really loud noise, sounded like lots of things were breaking all at once. But it's safe to come out, now. Promise!"

No response.

Dami tried the doorknob. It was unlocked. She pushed the door open, just a crack. She didn't want to enter if he forgot to lock it... "Are you okay?"

"I'm not scared," came Oli's voice behind the door. She waited patiently for him to continue. "I don't get scared of things."

That didn't seem right. Plenty of people got scared. "Well, okay," Dami agreed anyway, happy that he was talking to her. "You were very, very brave yesterday."

More shuffling— a sound like an impact, like someone standing up or walking too quickly and bumping into something else. Quick, little footsteps approaching the door, but not quite getting all the way there. "What do you mean by that?"

"With everything you tried to do, back at the other place. I know we didn't really want to go back there—" and Dami hadn't even seen the worst of it, cowering away in the kitchen while Oli and the others stood by Quiet's side— "but it was nice how you did everything you could to get us out of it. I've never seen *anyone* stand up to Thelka like you did."

No response. Dami felt the door get pushed beneath her hand, latch clicking into place easily. Dami blinked, thinking.

"Even if it didn't work all the way, it was a good effort. Thank you for trying," Dami told the door.

A long pause.

"I *am* very brave, it's true, I'm glad someone around here noticed," Oli echoed her sentiments behind the door. His voice was clearer now, like he was just on the other end. "Just doing my best in some remarkably difficult situations."

Forgetting for a moment she couldn't be seen behind the door, she nodded. "I know things have been tense, lately, but..." and for a second she contemplated her next words, taking a breath as if about to confide a secret, "...I meant it. Everything I said up until now, I meant every word."

"Meant every word of what?" And the moment was snuffed out by Tabi rounding the corner, Winnie in tow. Dami couldn't really be upset to see Winnie walking on her own, after everything. She just hoped what she said had time to sink in.

Unexpectedly, the door *opened*. Dami stepped back hurriedly as Oli strode out like no conversation had occurred at all, like he hadn't been confiding anything to her or her to him. "Just that I'm the most qualified and distinguished person here, is all, not a thing that anyone *here's* doubted, I'm sure."

He briefly paused long enough to acknowledge Winnie, standing there, not at all apparently injured in most if not every tangible way. He changed course, only barely noticeably, from trying to brush past the group and make a quick escape to *just* casually standing with Dami between him and her.

Tabi glanced to Winnie, currently testing to see if glares *could* cut someone if they ran sharp enough. "Uh-huh," she drawled sarcastically.

"Can we please get along for five minutes?" Dami had not meant to say that aloud. But she did. Tabi moved to create a buffer between Winnie and Oli, like Dami was doing. Winnie ducked around her immediately, too fast for Tabi to scruff.

"Not with *him*," Winnie growled, leaning into Dami's space and twitching her head to point in Oli's direction.

Oli straightened his back, pointing. "Ah, see, she started it this time. I am *not* to blame for whatever she does next."

Winnie pulled back with a light hop, head raised in self-righteous offense. "You *would* assume I'd pull something the moment I have the strength to, wouldn't you?"

"See, we do think alike," Oli agreed readily, almost cheery. "You *did* toss us down a flight of stairs the moment we turned our back on you."

"As if you wouldn't have done the same?" Winnie's tail was swishing behind her at an impressive pace. She didn't seem especially angry, though. "You're just mad you didn't think to make *me* go first."

"Can we cut this short?" Tabi cut in, reaching to grab at the back of Winnie's neck. She ducked beneath, scurrying out of the way and to Tabi's side. Tabi didn't follow her movements, arms falling slack at her sides. At Winnie's incredulous stare, she deadpanned, "I'm not chasing you in circles, you'll make us both look foolish."

"I had to talk to him anyway," Dami insisted, reaching up to sling an arm over his shoulders to pull him down to her level. He fell in line, maybe a little more enthusiastically than Dami anticipated, not expecting the surprise attack.

She heard a very audible *crack*. "Oh no, are you okay?"

Oli moved his head slightly from side to side. "Never better."

"Impressive takedown, Dami!" Ava shouted from across the hallway. She bounded over to the group in heavy steps that rattled the floor, reaching up to offer Dami a high-five with extra momentum. Dami politely waited for her to slow her roll before she took her hand clean off her wrist, then removed her arm from its sling around Oli's neck to tap their palms gently together.

To her slight surprise, Oli didn't scurry back to his room.

"Sorry, what are we talking about?" Ava caught herself, addressing the rest of the circle forming in the middle of the hallway.

"We needed something to take our minds off everything," Dami started.

"*And* to prevent Tabi from murdering Frosty," Winnie grinned. "At least, that's what *Dami* thinks this'll do..."

"I believe I'm lacking a lot of context," Oli interrupted.

“Tabi needs to get her boyfriend away from the freak trying to seduce him,” Winnie said easily, nonchalantly, as if it were morning gossip.

That information, incidentally, was new to Dami too.

“Why would you *say* it like that?!”

“You should've seen the way he was—” Winnie started, eyes shining and hands raised in sadistic joy at sharing cursed information, then stopped. “Well, not that *I* did, but... I have a *feeling*, it involved a lot of intentional positioning.”

Oli’s eyes almost shone at that new piece of information. “Come again?”

“Later,” Dami didn’t want to interrupt, but, “Ava, I meant our project.”

“Oh!” Ava clapped, and Oli ducked behind Dami again. “Yes! Good! Right!”

Letters, written by a finger on the skin of the back of her arm. W-H-A-T-P-R-O-J-E-C-T.

She turned her head back to him, whispering conspiratorily. “It’s a secret, we’re planning a surprise redecorating of Quiet’s room!”

“Isn’t that just a fancy way to say robbery?” Oli whispered back.

“Not if he has nothing to steal,” Tabi answered, and Oli pulled back. “That’s the issue we’re trying to solve here, actually.”

“*Reverse* robbery,” Oli amended. “That’s good, that’s good. He deserves nice things. We all do, really, at the end of the day. It’s a bit of a *belief* of mine, you could call it. Now, who’s ‘in the know’ with this?”

“Most of everyone,” Winnie declared as flatly as her voice would allow. Which admittedly wasn’t all too flat; her inflections had a certain quality to them which made everything she said sound a bit like poetry, like the rhythm of a fable or fairytale. At least, that’s what it sounded most like to Dami’s ears.

“Oh, perfect, I know most of everyone,” Oli winked. Dami blinked, not getting the joke. Was that a joke? He grinned. “Even better thing you came to me, because I’m the one with the money.”

“How do you get the money?”

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”

“We’re getting nowhere with him,” Tabi groaned, turning to Ava at once. “You’re the smart one in this. Until we get any better intel, what’s your professional recommendation?”

It was truly something to behold, to see Ava suddenly be so into her element. She was a tall woman, even larger when she swelled with pride. She was almost glowing. “A good

wardrobe is paramount in a big room like that. You have all that space and you're not making it a training room, you need to deck it out!"

"I don't think Quiet has enough clothes to fill a wardrobe," Tabi said, glancing from her notebook.

"Then write that down, too!"

"May I remind you I'm the treasurer here? To not be suspicious and make neighbours talk, you should only have the budget for one shopping spree at a time," Oli interrupted, also, it was clear, in his element.

Tabi argued, Ava groaned, and Oli made it worse. The three went on like that for some time. Ava started to tense whenever Tabi's writing hand paused, in dread of the next clarifying question.

Dami glanced to Winnie, She'd been silent a good, long moment now. She was sitting straight with her legs crossed, tail dutifully curled around to hang down her side where she sat. Her hands were folded in her lap, clawed nails hidden by hands clasped and folded together lightly. Her mouth was pursed; not shut tight, but like she'd fallen silent, lost in thought. Her wide eyes glanced between the speakers of the conversation, but not following their words. Despite her rapt attention, there was a distant look in those big, catlike eyes.

Ava finished rattling off her list. Tabi glanced to her sister, and to the uncharacteristically quiet girl beside her. She raised an eyebrow. "Anything else to add?"

"He needs a lock on his door," Winnie said, voice oddly direct and monotone.

Dami wilted. "That's not really a 'decoration,' though, is it?..."

"It's not," Winnie agreed. The words seemed to come from her breath, more than her mouth or throat; they seemed to supersede her voice. "But he needs one."

"Hard agree," Oli interjected. "Everyone should have a lock on their doors. It's just a basic matter of privacy, don't you agree? Only naive people don't have locks on their doors, especially in this day and age. You just never know!"

"No harm in getting one," Tabi agreed, jotting it down for her shopping list. "But we're looking for things to make him comfortable, not paranoid."

"That's the only thing that can help," Winnie said, her face looking like she'd swallowed a lemon. Her voice regained its scratchy texture, and Dami felt an odd relief settle in her chest. "All the rest is just some petty nonsense. I'd sure like a lock on my door, Tabitha. Shame I wasn't *allowed* one."

"That was Plethora's decision, not mine."

"Narcissistic and controlling, is what it was!"

"They said it was for emergencies, so if something was wrong, they could always come and get us," Tabi defended, then relented at once. "When *we* figure out where it is we're all staying, you can have a lock. Alright?"

Chapter End Notes

overthink_it - All in all, I'd say we're all doing fairly well for ourselves, hm? Characters, authors, and my sincerest hope for the readers, included. A little bit of The Horrors never hurt anybody, except for all the times it very much did, to the extent we're exploring in this exact fic. Ah well, maybe The Horrors do hurt a bit. Nothing some serotonin from some good *comments* can't fix, appreciated as always and forever!~ Hope you enjoy.

Chapter 20: Breve descripción de mi persona

Chapter Summary

Good morning. Mind the gaps between life and death and the spaces between the bed and the floor. Redecoration means shifts of decorum, though in hopes for the perfect picture in the end. Everything you've gone through and all you've done will be made worth it in the end if you just achieve your final goals. But for now, it's just a matter of goodnight.

Chapter Notes

Was told the names were confusing if they were at the end so here they are, at the beginning!

Broken - Borja
Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi
Cold - Caín
Contrarian - Connie
Hunted - Avellano/Ave
Opportunist - Oleander/Oli
Paranoid - Paco
Cheated - Ciro
Hero - Fernando/Nando
Smitten - Felipe
Skeptic - Harrier/Harri
Prisoner - Tabi/Tabitha
Damsel - Dami/Damiana
Witch - Winnie
Tower - Thelka
Adversary - Ava
Nightmare - Clara
Spectre - Grace
Stranger - Plethora

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Nothing got the brain wondering if you did exist after all like knowing the sunbeams were touching your body but you couldn't feel them.

She screwed her eyes shut at morning light. It wasn't hers to take.

“Grace,” in retrospect, was a misnomer. She did not feel *graceful*. Weight pulled down at her, the gravity of what she’d done the night before heavy on her mind.

All her concerns, and it had almost amounted to nothing. *Worse* than nothing. Impulsivity and insensitivity: all she’d feared for them, and the one she neglected to consider was herself. A violence inflicted and only remembered when he’d flinched from the windup of the next strike; an anticipation she couldn’t take back.

And still, he offered her his hand.

And still, she was here, settled in with the breaking dawn like morning dew. Welcomed by nature.

Ghosts did not come out at night because the sun hurt them; ghosts hid away throughout the day because the sun did not see them at all. Because the light went straight through them, as if they were not there, as if they were nothing. Because to be seen, to be warm, were the privileges of living things. And ghosts did not like to remember they were excluded in that way, from the small and wondrous things that the living did not know they were capable of losing.

Still, there was something else, beyond the sunbeams which did not see her. Something foreign, but not unknown—calling to a distant memory of a time far away, maybe a dream of a life she never truly had. A radiation at her side, gentle and only noticeable because she’d never felt anything but cold before.

And she did not feel cold now.

She had thought that being tired was a default state for the undead, given the fact death was called an ‘eternal rest.’ As it turned out, her assumption was wrong. And feeling rested was a novelty, was so nice she didn’t know how she could have gone so long without.

She was *warm*.

Unwilling to open her eyes just yet, she chased after the feeling, wanting to sink back down into it. Regaining awareness of her own body. Warmth, she was *warm*, and she was *holding someone’s hand*, and she was *beneath sheets*. All things she never thought she were capable of, could ever have again.

And there was something, within her, pulsing. Something that was replacing the touch of death inside her chest.

“I can feel it,” Grace whispered to the space between her and him, as quiet as the one who had helped her out of the cabin. She confessed, awed, “what’s connecting us. It makes my heart beat.”

There was something still in that moment. Or perhaps there was a stillness to the moment.

As if, for as long as she willed it, it would last forever, rhythmic in its patterns without permutation. Steady and safe; the predictability of Quiet’s breathing, near silent in the air

between them, inviting her to follow with her own. Time yielded to feeling.

As if, for just a moment, the air was spiced with a delicate sweetness, and her chest were swelling, and she was taking her first breaths anew with him. Reborn in the space between the sleeping and the waking, daydreams overlapping like spots of shade cast by trees in the night. All texture blurred away, scars fading with time like pain and loss and unwelcome memories.

As if to say, *"you can stay, if you'd like. Or leave, if you prefer. You may return, but I will not hold you by expectation. I only accept you, if you me."*

There was a silent sort of peace in Quiet's expression, as he slept. Present, but folded within the serene bliss of unconsciousness in the face of a world that was just too much sometimes. Away in their own little world. And he let her in.

There was a physicality between them, beyond the spiritual; in interlinked fingers and the dissipation of body heat. Her body — *could she call it that now?* — did not, she did not think, she could not tell, but she knew for a fact Quiet's did. They were perhaps the warmest thing she'd ever known.

She did not understand why the chilly one had been her original shard. She could do nothing *but* feel.

They were real. There was weight between them, a way they sank into the surface of the blankets and covers and comforters as if melting into it. As if unbound from rigid shape, allowed to relax and reduce their contrast. Theirs was a peace she wasn't wholly familiar with. And the *feeling*. Not just from her, not just from him, but from seeing them, here, in this moment. *Warm and seen.*

Before, she had been close. She had watched, and *seen*, through halting embrace and tentative gestures of affection and closeness— she had seen some of the tension in his chest unfurl. That tension she'd felt and known so intimately, that crushed her and him, inside and out, that reminded her of dying and absence and missing home. She'd *seen* how they loosened the knot without thinking or realizing, how they progressed; not quite ready to be at peace, but willing to rest, if they had her and Fernando in their arms. Held. Cherished. And now, that tension. It was not present.

It promised her she may return; could she not promise the same? Never before had she seen him and felt so strongly. It was *right*. *This* was where they were meant to be.

She had not rested, before, when she saw them, that other time. They had seen her, too, because they were greater than the sun. They reached out to her like they were doing now, now with more practice than before, but before remained special all the same; because it was progress. Progress in the right direction.

Less so did she rest when he rose, when he was gone for an inordinate amount of time, when he came back and the knot in his chest had woven itself anew. And he did not rest, afterwards, though his body had tried. Independent of them. A connection severed.

He did not reach out to her like he did before and like he was doing now; she did not feel that warmth within him. As if it had been snuffed out. Holding without cherishing. Unconscious without resting. He'd returned, but not the same. He rested as the dead did, uncertain and with great plagues upon the mind.

She'd never rested before.

Neither had they.

There was no knot keeping them apart now; nothing caught or tied in either of their chests or wrapping around their necks. They were free.

She *did* exist, somewhat. The warmth and the weight proved that. People talked to her, answered her, acknowledged her. Proof of existence. As minutes passed, then stretched into hours, she could drift past the door towards the noises she could hear, and people would see her. Look at her.

Because hours passed, and her bedmate didn't seem to be prone to waking anytime soon. And she was not about to disturb their sleep when it was clearly needed. She'd know if anything happened, now.

"I'm going, okay? Someone needs to prevent the others from joining me too soon."

Predictably, Quiet didn't answer her, but it did make her feel better. His name suited him.

Which one could suit her? Maybe the others could see in her something she couldn't.

It was the nature of things to consume. This, Avellano understood. If he had to put it another way, a way better suited for the likes of Oleander: It was the nature of things, all things, to be a product of exchange. Avellano lived because Quiet died; because Quiet needed someone to teach him how to run, to dodge. Ave was not fast enough. But Gonzalo taught Quiet how to attack, to fight back. Against the woman of lances, a skeleton of blades and bones of steel, he couldn't fight well enough.

There was more to them, now.

Avellano was faster, yes, as surely as Gonzalo fought with greater discipline. But they had evolved past their initial archetypes; they adapted past their initial specializations. From the brutality of their hatching grounds, victims of nature, to the serenity of a new world, nurtured into people instead of thoughts. Fleeting impulses to dodge became passions to run free, and reactionary instincts to fight became drive to live fully.

A prey animal could learn to pounce. A machine of war could learn to heal.

And what had been consumed, to get them here? They'd drunk their fill of opportunities, abundant in a place where there were more paths than there were cabins, more roads to venture and burrows to build. Fear exchanged for peace. Change exchanged for routine.

There was room to grow in familiar places. Digestion came best while resting in the homestead.

Exchange.

Ave's back itched, but itching was not burning. The material used to seal his death-wound shut was material exchanged from elsewhere; meagre fat reserves and muscle built through training. Both needed to be built back up, nurtured the same as before, special care taken to keep a steady pace in the walk. Overexertion was ill-advised. Rationing was necessary.

He knew it. Quiet was itching too. Exchanged death-markings, scars, the same way Ave's had been. Not as deep, but far more numerous. Perhaps lesser in volume, but leagues higher in surface area; to the point the volume may have been irrelevant after all. Despite it, he did not eat. He needed to. It was not nature, then, which compelled him. Creatures of compassion must band together; and compassionate, he had to be. So, despite his inclinations, Ave reserved a portion to share.

The concepts of 'oversleeping' and 'mealtimes' were ones he didn't adhere to, really. The body gave the signals it gave. No clock required. And he was sure Quiet's body would give the same signals after awakening from slumber, as deserved as it was.

Quiet was the type to sleep better in a group, than alone. They'd all understood it. Ave at first believed it was because he was simply unused to the loneliness; that he was used to thoughts like the rest of them crowding his space, did not know what to do with the openness. He understood better now. It was as much for the sociality of their species as it was for safety; none of them were built for solitary living.

It made sense, then, that the newest member of the flock would be bonded as she was. She smelt of petrichor and feathers and Quiet as she drifted away from him. Strange, unnatural, she was, but all of them were in their own ways. She was more than she was before.

Still. Quiet had been left alone, with her absence from his nest. It was clear she was new; the rest did not elect to leave Quiet when he came to them. Some because they preferred to lay down. Some because they wanted up. But Quiet typically followed, whenever the silence was broken.

If he wasn't going to awaken by himself, someone would have to do it.

Someone, not specific to him, because he'd been held up in his food delivery quest. Movement in peripherals which caught his attention like a fox in a snare; or perhaps it was just that which he had seen.

Usually, the only sign Oli was scared was slightly trembling fingers and how his smell turned brackish. His eyes were just a touch wide, a bead of sweat trailing down his neck. Could be a subtle cry for help. Could be anticipation for what could happen.

He tapped Gonchi on the shoulder as he passed him, "mancha, te toca."

A disbelieving laugh burst out of Gonchi. Ave paid him no mind.

Oli was pride and white lies piling up like coins and a sharp smile like a severed artery. Oli was never tamed, so compassion sometimes hurt him. A snake, a common culebra, more of a fox than a dog.

"I can't do that again," he hissed. And Ave understood how Cain must have looked at him to get that reaction. Like admiring a pretty doll on a shelf. Like choosing cuts of meat in a supermarket. Like the split second before throwing that doll to the ground. Like someone who was starving.

Oli looked back at Ave. Still a little defiant. Ave could see it. He was incredibly nervous. Even when facing two monsters, he hadn't been as outwardly nervous.

"How long's it been— wow, just *look* at that time," Oli whistled, glancing at the clock. It had been a matter of a few hours, at most. "There's a lot of time in a day, I have to say, and it's a real wonder how much you can do with it, and still have time left, and there are just so many things to be doing. Great things, important things! So important, even, that I think it's only fair we keep these 'turn' things we've all been talking about on the down-low, even. Yes. Definitely."

"‘And,’ ‘and,’ ‘and.’" Ave muttered. He didn't get the glare he was expecting. Oh, there was one, but he didn't feel too cowed.

Ciro, a short ways away, murmured something in the periphery; low enough in volume that only Ave's pricked ears would pick it up. "No puede decir tantas boludeces en un segundo, tiene un don."

"It's all just a matter of teamwork, you see? And— eh... It *just so happened* that I'd been so overeager to *get the ball rolling* between us all, I, uh..." Oli glanced around the room, then to Ave's hands, and snapped his fingers. "Neglected to eat breakfast, yes, which is *whyyy* I'm on my way to! Do that! An— *That's* why I'm just a *biit* too preoccupied, you know? Busy guys and busy schedules."

"Of course..." Ave hummed, and Oli winced.

"Can you inject a little more emotion into your voice for a second?" Oli hissed, voice a little too shrill on the bad side of 'pleading.' He seemed to recognize so, himself, and stumbled over his words in his attempt to regain a sense of composure. "I just had to deal with a whole lot of *nothing* from the *king* of it, lemme tell you, so I've had my fill for the day. Maybe the whole week. The month, even!"

Oli was agile enough on his feet that he knew how to reorient himself after someone misstepped on the dance that was social interactions. He wasn't prone to lose his footing, let alone after the final act. It was an entire language Ave hatched not knowing how to speak, and all its intricacies.

It wasn't like him to be rattled.

Oli had been doing a good job. The best job — at least, the best that could be expected of him, and was that not the same as simply “the best” in the end?

He’d finished saying something; just putting something down, really, into the conversational space. Not much had been picked up though. So he decided to put something new down, test the waters so-to-speak. He wanted to see if he’d get any bites on the line. “You really don’t speak much, do you?”

“I don’t,” Cain agreed, hands folded in front of him. He didn’t do it right. His hands didn’t rest naturally, where they should’ve; it was like he was copying the gesture from somebody else, someone whose arms were shorter than his, and so he held his hands at an unnatural position not understanding the angle of his arms was the thing that mattered in the pose.

“Why is that, do you think?” Oli tried to prompt. Cain stared. Silence to fill. A mounting pressure on his shoulders, to carry this conversation on his back until the end of time. Why?! “I mean, if you think it’s just because you don’t have much to say, then that is a very reasonable choice; no point speaking if you have nothing to say, right?”

“Correct,” Cain said as platitude. It was the most invested he’d been in the conversation yet, really. So that was some good progress!

“You know, I think you do have things to say, though,” Oli offered, gesturing out to him, waving to his standing body as if pointing out all the good qualities he didn’t really see at the moment. “Great things, important things. The kinds of things every one of us would want to hear, you know? People like hearing what other people think.”

“Some people like hearing themselves talk,” Cain added, and Oli pounced on the reciprocation in conversation like a starved animal.

“Exactly, my friend!” He cheered, continuing. “There are all sorts of people, with all sorts of opinions! And you know, I think we have that in common, you and I. We just like to hear everyone out, don’t we? We like to relate. And what better way to listen than to speak up, you know? I’m sure you have a lot to answer for.”

It was fine. He was doing a good job! Cain hadn’t taken his eyes off him once, and that meant things were going just as planned. All part of the plan.

“I think you speak, often, and never have anything of value to say,” Cain said.

“He— he wasn’t even listening to me!” Oli whined, leaning his back against the wall. His eyes kept darting to the sides, shifty and scared.

“What— that’s not all there is, you cut off right at the good part. What happened next?” Connie complained, but Oli kept right on talking over him and his heckling.

“And I am *easy* to listen to, you know this. Hard to resist! I’m just such a conversationalist, real good with people. I’d say so. But with him... I could only talk *at* him.”

"Isn't that what you *usually* do?" Winnie snarked, a good distance behind Ave. Oli jumped.

He kept licking his lips. They were darker than usual. There was a thin red line around them, starting to swell, skin irritated and dry.

Winnie knew she was different from everyone else and fed every mouth she encountered with aconite and the need to lash out, hoping that this time she'll survive. Constantly on the lookout. She could evade everything except her own loneliness, and compassion, to her, was a horrifying thing without fangs. A vixen caught in a trap. She was more of a rabid dog than a master.

"You don't know anything," Oli barely spared her a glance, instead turning straight to Ave. His pupils shifted and darted like those of a prey animal's, scanning instead of tracking, searching for movement even when he tried to stare straight. He leaned in as if looking to whisper, even as his pulse raced in his throat, straining it as he forced himself to project his voice at speaking volume. Trying so hard to act natural he did not act like himself at all, his instinct to sneak suppressed for the suspicion it would spurn. "*You* do."

And Ave was afraid, in turn. Oli wasn't supposed to look like *him*.

There was a flicker in Oli's gaze, as he registered the look in Ave's, and something passed through his face. A practiced smile, a rehearsed squint to his eyes to mimic the way they crinkled when the expression was genuine. "I *told* you so. I *told* you he'd go for us. Looks like my insight is dead-on accurate, 'cause I got him to show himself in record time."

Like Oleander had told him, Ave wasn't that good a liar. Not with the things that truly mattered. And that was why most of the time, he simply chose to remain silent rather than deign to show the world the wounds that floated just a little behind his eyes, never cauterized or scarred.

Silence was the furthest thing from his mind, now. *It had been two*. "What does that mean? What did he do to you?"

"Nothi— *not* like that, *I mean*, I stopped him before he could get at me all the way." Oli raised his hands, palms facing out, then lowered them back down. "He tried to... *get in*, but luckily for m— luckily for *us*, I triple-check the locks on my doors before going out."

Words didn't count for much when the senses could be altered. *This is three*. A lesser wound, if his heartbeat still pumped in his throat and his legs were still set for running, but a wound nonetheless. Rest was needed. Not that Oli would ever accept a remedy from him.

Too many things happening. He couldn't pay close attention to everything. Winnie walked a few paces nearer. "Did he touch you?"

Oli wasn't supposed to choke on his own saliva. He couldn't be caught unaware, that was the *point*.

"No? What are you saying?" his face twitched, like his skin was overtight for his bones. Maybe it was shedding season.

Rest was definitely needed. Preferably without her around, they tended to rile each other up. She would root in place; he could teach her to run, instead, at the right time.

Gonchi had walked to the entrance of the room so quickly or silently Ave hadn't noticed him. Distantly, he wondered if Gonchi had learned that from him. "I'll be right back."

"Bad!" Ave jumped, ready to block him if he had to. The fact Gonchi was at least double his size was of little importance. Gonchi wouldn't hurt him.

"What, why can't I go? Do you want me to wake Quiet instead?"

"That is a bad idea!" Ave said, grabbing at Gonchi so as to pull him down to his level. Gonchi obliged, leaning down so he could hiss at him more directly. "Do you remember what happened when you tried to wake Ciro that first week?"

"Oh yeah, that was fun." The grin on Gonchi's face was as sharp as it was sinister. "Do you honestly think I can lose to him?"

"Don't go alone." That was all he asked. That was all he could ask.

"I'll go with him." That came from Grace, not from Ava as he had been expecting. "I think I know how he works."

Was that enough? It would have to be. It would all depend if they could distract him for long. It would depend if he decided to cut his losses after an unsuccessful hunt. Ave hoped it would work. He wasn't used to playing sentinel. Oli had vanished from his sight.

He could move on, then. Keep walking to his original destination. It wasn't far.

While he thought, he walked, and while he walked, he thought. Of their current situation, of how finding a hole to hide it was not an option, no matter how much he wanted it to be.

He did not like to think of himself as 'young', but Ave's imagination could conjure far too many terrible scenarios, like Paco did. Also like Paco, he did not find the five-in-one pleasant. The others called them *plethora*, but to Ave they were a Sentinel. Capitalized. From what little information the strays had told them, they did not make appearances at mealtimes, and where they slept and how they could get around with no one noticing was one of those irritating mysteries that he imagined Harri was frustrated he couldn't crack.

Not so for Ave. He didn't need the answer, nor even the question. It was the irritation, the itching of skin and the burning behind the ears, that he needed. No need to ask; he already knew. Nothing more to say.

There was something to them that rang *false*. *Different*. *Other*. Not quite like the coating that pooled in Oli's tongue, his first line of defense against anyone that would want to trap him. Something worse than tar, slick like oil.

It wasn't that they couldn't scare him, they *did* scare him. It would be stupid to not fear them. However, they also struck him as ridiculous. In their small, remote kingdom they ruled as queens, but someone else pulled the strings. Ave could almost run his fingers across their

unreal surface, attached as they were to the spines. Not the apex predator they thought themselves as.

Sometimes, Paco talked at him, wondering if being tied to Quiet at all was a danger. Wondering if Quiet was still in the helpless position of a fly. Bound to webs that held them pinned, but left them just free enough to twitch and struggle, silk thrumming as they did, calling their devourer near. Close. Closer.

Close enough. He was at their door. He tested the knob, half-expecting the door to not budge. It swung inwards without resistance. No lock. He thought Quiet had taken steps to protect himself. Then again, they had not slept by their lonesome last night.

Damiana was right, Ave thought as his eyes immediately locked onto the only object of interest in the room, like tunnel vision. *There's not enough here.*

There were no hiding places when the option was just one. Even if there were as many nooks and crannies Ave would have wanted, he'd still have found Quiet. All he had to do was follow his thread back to them. No matter what, he'd always find them.

...did that make them feel safe?

He crouched down, his eyes automatically adjusting to the low light. Clear as day, to him, there they were.

Quiet was curled up in the fetal position. No—not fetal position. That was something he had never been. He was simply curled up, like something small, like something that knew to protect its belly.

Ave felt an odd, almost pleasant feeling. Recognition. *'I taught him that.'* Then, for the very same reason:

(Worry) What's wrong?

The look Quiet gave him made him turn around to look for the threat, even though he knew there were none.

(Lie) Nothing.

(Confusion) Nothing happened. I woke up down here. (Trepidation) I don't know why.

(Appraisal) Hiding. From what?

(Trepidation) I don't know.

A sense of hesitance. Wings at their back tried to flex helplessly in the cramped space, their hands gesturing outwards with them. Aimless, directionless, without clear purpose or intent. Ave did not feel, but saw, the impression. Just... *Everything.*

Ave sniffed. A faint hint of petrichor, faded by the hours and diluted with time. At this point, the room smelt as it always did: almost like nothing, just dust and stale air, Quiet's scent just

barely present in shadows and echoes beneath the mundane. Nothing lingers here. Never on its own.

(Appraisal) A change in the air. Woods without birdsong hide something in their shadows.

He peered down the crawlspace. Fear reflected in their grey eyes, bright spots in the dark. Idly, his fingers *tap-tap-tapped* on the wood as he considered his next move.

(Hesitance) Is it safe to come out?

Quiet's entire body tensed, froze up, dug itself further into the hovel and the wall.

*(Terror) No. **I can't.***

Trembling, they forced themselves to stop, body twitching against their commands. Their eyes narrowed, upset with themselves.

(Confusion) Why wouldn't it be?

Ave lowered himself further, so that the only thing he could see was the space Quiet enclosed herself in. Claustrophobic, for one. For two... *there is space.*

(Appraisal) The burrow is safer. Can see what's coming before it sees you.

(Offering) May I join you? Until the danger is passed.

(Confusion) There's nothing to pass.

(Appraisal) Your body gives the signals it does for a reason.

Quiet tucked further into the dark, scooting to one end. An acceptance; a welcome, in their own, scared way. Ave ducked below. The darkness was enveloping, but he had seen in darker spaces. Carefully, he scooted to the other end of the underside of Quiet's bed, giving them a wide berth in case they changed their mind and made a break for escape. Their wingspan was large; it was best to ensure, in their blind panic, they did not accidentally smack him or hurt themselves.

Unexpectedly, a hand grasped his.

(Confusion) Safe?

(Reassurance) Safe.

His grip tightened.

(Protection) Safe.

This would be his contribution, Ave silently vowed. The flooring beneath Quiet's bed was hard and wooden and uncomfortable on the joints. A second bedding must go beneath the

first. With better texture, too; grant their talons something to snag on, to ground them to this place.

In time, this territory would be marked as *theirs*.

Nothing would come down here for them.

Nothing would catch them.

Nothing would hurt them.

They were safe here.

Harrier came into the room with simple intentions: frame the dimensions of the room, form a concrete mental map of its layout, determine areas of absence that needed to be remedied. That this involved scouting near the walls was an inherent fact. As was Harri's need to check in Quiet's storage, to see if his space was presently adequate to his needs. That he tripped over a floorboard, found a notebook under it and read his own name on the cover—

"GIVE TO ~~SKEPTIC~~ HARRI AFTER FINISHING CATALOGUING"

Well. His *old* name, too. Crossed out and written over, because pen and ink couldn't be erased like pencil could be. Let it be said that Harri wouldn't ever be truly over his skepticism streak. It'd saved them before, and it'd save them again. Though he never asked Quiet for a catalog of anything.

Curiosity, morbid or not, had him open to the first page.

The heading of the first section was neat and orderly. Quiet's handwriting had improved over the course of their new life, much like everyone else's, and much like a variety of miscellaneous skills they'd all only just begun building up for themselves. Crossed T's and dotted I's were the marks of a life begun anew: a life only just beginning, but already so far beyond their past. It was a mark of progress, that legibility. And printed so neatly at the top of the first page was a simple eleven-letter word. "Suffocation." Below it, clarifications. In parenthesis, lowercase, a specification of location: neck; and beside it, a related topic, "drowning too?"

Beneath, a simple term, "result," and a description that followed.

"Pain in lungs, like they were on fire. Fairly short, (maybe needs more time to return oxygen to blood but very little physical damage done?), felt kind of good? Peaceful, joyful. Some neck bruising left."

Strangulation, too, then, Harri amended. He wasn't sure when this could have occurred.

Scrawled out text in the margins. Harrier was no stranger to redactions, nor how to see beyond them. He held the paper up to the light, looking for the patterns of the indents left behind.

~~"It's what you deserve you're a failure, stupid, killer that can't kill."~~

He brought the notebook down to resting level, heavy in his hands. That was in need of corrections. Despite himself, he turned the page to the next section. Was it curiosity that moved his hands for him, or something more morbid, something more sinister? It was not so much a choice he made as a progression of an event.

The next section: "Neck snap." No clarifications, specifications, or relations necessary. And its results:

"Couldn't move for the first hour; pin-and-needles all the while. Couldn't feel stuff right. Nerve damage? There were many nerve-endings to reconnect. Felt something popping inside."

The meaning of the word "result" rearranged itself in Harri's understanding. This was not a catalogue of deaths, or at least not the direct experience of them; this was a catalogue of revivals and reincarnations, and the way the experiences of the past imprinted on the present. A body unraveling, ceasing to function, and a new vessel being rewoven from what remained; and so the system restarted.

His hands stalled on the page. He had not asked for this either.

He swallowed. His throat felt dry. Still, he continued reading; he couldn't stall forever. Just how much had Quiet written?

"Blood loss, neck."

"Result: By far the quickest death (smallest wound to fix?) Less than two minutes to die. Sore throat after. Difficulty talking."

A brief phantom sensation of something cool and metallic beneath his chin; he knew that one. Quick, but not quite painless.

He raised a hand to his neck, sneaking fingers between skin and the barrier his turtleneck provided, found something unusual – scar tissue in a precise line. The memory bubbled through him. The gleam of the blade right before the wet-hot spray of blood. He knew the wound left a scar, of course, had seen it in the mirror countless times, but—

He dug his fingers into the skin to feel the hard knotting of it, the stark, tangible ridge it cut across the inside of his esophagus, and jerked back with a hiss.

It was easy enough to ignore, most of the time. He couldn't complain, compared to the scars the others had. He couldn't dream of complaining.

The flicker of a question, in his mind, the silent wondering of who else would relate to which entries in the list, as his eyes moved independent of him, continuing to scan the pages.

"Crushing."

"Result: Longest return to movement." Something scratched out, redacted again. He would read it after he finished the section. It was short; curt and to the point. Written like there wasn't time to elaborate, ~~like he was running out of time, drowning in memories alone but refusing to share them until he organized them right.~~ *"Not again. Hurt. Hurt bad. Everything cracked. Didn't like that one. Don't deserve to like it though."*

He tucked that last sentence somewhere in the back of his mind. It would have to be addressed later. At the present moment, he needed to check the redaction.

~~*"They were worried after detangling from Wild, before Fury."*~~

He paused, tracing the letters with his finger as he read them. He mouthed it silently, sounding it out with chapped lips and squinting as if to intimidate the written words into providing him more information.

~~Of course they'd be worried. Of course they'd check in on him, on each other. That was the logical response following any traumatic event, why note *that*?~~ The titles caught his attention.

He knew that latter title. The former hadn't been seen in the game yet, but the word itself sounded familiar. Still: something wasn't right.

There wasn't, necessarily, a 'worry' in what they had seen of the game. There hadn't been periods of time where Quiet couldn't move in the beginning of the chapters.

Why? (It intensified over time, growing exponentially worse; perceived punishments grew disproportionate to the point of nonrelation. He and the others had been lucky to have a quick way out. The potential of "how much worse can it be?" was near-infinite. "Better" was a finite concept. And yet, the possibility that Fury was not, as he had thought, the worst of it made his stomach churn.)

At some point, he'd leaned towards the wall to support himself. He held the notebook in one hand as his free one ghosted towards the lone nightstand in the room, of course finding nothing. Nothing was here. That was why he *was* here, in the first place.

He blinked, reorienting himself, and recalibrated by pushing his glasses up his face with his free hand. He'd been looking for a glass, or a mug— was looking for something to drink. His throat rasped with each inhale. He wasn't going to walk out yet, though.

He turned the page. The next section's heading made something in his skull go numb.

"Starvation."

The words were a rougher scrawl, Harri noted absently. Examining the features of the typography without yet getting into their meaning— denotative, connotative; objective, subjective. The letters were sharper. The indentations they made into the page were deeper, the graphite stabbed and carved into the page. A sign of distress or hasty writing, most likely; less likely, a sign of some form of regression.

He felt like he was being pulled. Sensations, foreign and unreal, tugged at his arm and his side; a sense of weight. Misplaced sensations, aimless and without due cause. He leaned, just barely, and glanced away from the page long enough that he recognized his legs were aching to pace. Out the door, specifically. To leave this behind.

He stood up straight, ignoring it. Focusing on something else.

Harri had gone through the erosion of a building without experiencing the slightest twinge in his stomach. He'd been prepared for it, but it never came. And yet...

Why? (The catalogue could provide *some* context. But not all of it. They were two sources he could come to, beyond it: primary or secondary. The use of the secondary would pry more information out of the primary; it provided leverage through exhaustion. Erosion of walls. He didn't want them gone, but the foundations were shaky. He could build them back up: better, safer. Sturdier, so nothing else could get in.)

"Longest death. Body eating itself. Can't let it happen again. Didn't like that one. They fell silent before I did. Went to sleep before I did." He leaned down to the only available surface in the room. It was not a comfortable working space, but determining the scratches of the lines was starting to feel like second nature. It was easier now that Quiet's handwriting was starting to resemble how it first looked in the woods. ~~*"Failed them. Can't do anything right. Hero always worries."*~~

Harrier paused.

He hadn't called Fernando "Hero" in quite some time.

...He supposed it made sense. It was his name, before, and this was *about* "before." *Noted.*

Continued. Next entry.

"Stabbing."

It felt like a return to normalcy, for some odd reason.

"Result: It burns. Quickest death depending on placement. The neck is my favorite—"

Harri put down the book. It was not closed; its open pages called to him, beckoning him closer to finish what he started. But he took a small step back; closed his eyes, pushed his glasses *hard* into his face.

"Favorite" was far too positive a word. Its connotations alone, even outside of context, did not imply good things. This was *bad*. A sudden headache seized him, not violently, but as though he only just now became aware of it. He winced, reaching up to hold his head, squinting from the onset of discarded pain.

Quiet, he thought, *should not have 'favorites.'*

That is a dangerous concept to internalize, he thought.

He thought, until he realized his hands were shaking.

Horror rose, from his stomach to his throat, like a sickness. Nausea, briefly, overwhelmed him. He'd only gently sat the book down, initially, but a flicker of the need to *slam* or throw it compressed his chest. *What was he reading? What was he reading?*

He moved to steady himself. He glanced down at the page, incidentally skimming the rest of the entry, as he felt the saliva in his mouth stick to his tongue. It contrasted unpleasantly with his dry heaving breath.

"—No matter where, it scars. Feathers covered it up."

What wasn't buried of the entry, anyway. He hesitated before working to read what Quiet decided he shouldn't have written.

"Ciro I'm sorry."

Harri wondered why Quiet didn't apologize to himself. Why his assertions he deserved his own torture were left open to the world. Open, specifically, to him. Quiet didn't think he *agreed*, did he? The back of his head was a crowded place with too many urgent concerns to stuff much else into. Too much to care about. Whatever it meant, he'd be running out of space, and soon at that.

And yet, he couldn't stop.

It was his own fault, at the end of the day. The critical flaw of his character. Harri could not, and would not, ever resist his own thirst for knowledge. His throat was parched. His skull felt like it may split in two from the headache. His skin was covered in goosebumps, aching and chilled at once. *How could he let it get this bad?* What he was drinking, now, did not go smoothly down the throat; nor did it leave him feeling quenched, no matter how much of it he chugged.

"Burning."

"Result: Hurt a lot for a little while. It never ended. Feathers made it worse, quicker. Can never forget the smell. The nothing was worse. I deserved it though."

And still, he drank. From an oasis of saltwater, he drank. It dehydrated him to the point of delirium. He couldn't stop reading no ~~matter how much he~~ **even if** he wanted to. That notebook was meant for him, specifically. (And it was never delivered.)

Even when the writing resembled scribbles more than script, it would not stop. It would *not*.

"Decapitation."

"No no no no no nononononono not good not that one bad wasn't good smelled so bad blood too much my body moved by itself not good was it hero was it skeptic who raised the blade it was me am I me? what am I? not living not good still my face? Is it the same? I don't know I can't tell I don't know if I look the same are these my eyes?"

He could barely read it, the "results." The results which were, unlike every other section, unmarked with the typical header as before. He was initially inclined to believe it was because there wasn't much to say. If a slit throat was a fast way to go, a severed neck would only logically be even faster. But he needed to ensure nothing was left behind, and in painstaking transcription, he managed it.

It was harder to restore than the formally redacted data. Something in his chest hurt. The water had dried, leaving mineral deposits behind. Salt poisoning.

That was not a 'result.'

He turned the page. Seeing the writing restored to some semblance of legibility, though still nowhere near the pristine script from the first page, did not make the ache any easier to bare. ~~He should have been relieved. Maybe part of him was. Maybe that was part of what made it hurt so much.~~ He kept reading.

"Enucleation."

Please, he thought, ~~just end it. Stop already. You~~ **It** *can't go on much longer.*

His fingers idly flipped through the pages remaining of the notebook. How many of them were there? Surely not enough to fill the entire thing. ~~Was this written in a single sitting? Would it be read in a single sitting? What was the plan, here, for either of them?~~

Like the first, this, too, had clarifications beneath its heading. Notes of injuries co-occurring with the accredited fatal wound: paralysis—*without* organ failure, see also: petrification; stabbing, location: throat.

But there were no results.

"the eyes are windows to the soul and mine were empty"

The handwriting was perfect.

And the rest of the page was blank.

The next page was, too. The next few, the next dozen. Blank. Empty. Gone. Just **stopped**. Just stopped writing. Finished writing what he wanted, or just stopped being capable. Just ran out of time. ~~A catalogue of death written until its writer followed his own footsteps.~~

There was a ringing in his ears.

His stomach hurt.

His breathing was uneven. He could see it. In bursts from his mouth. He couldn't get it out.

Skeptical Harrier was **not** superstitious, and so he did **not** feel like *he* was going to die. Death was not a contagious disease. Death was not a tangible substance infused into the paper and stuck onto his fingers, transferred by contact. Death was not an apparition, nor had it gathered

in the shadows corners of an empty tomb, nor was it watching his trembling hands fumble to shut its book closed.

He was fine.

The thought landed with a dull thud. It rang hollow throughout his head, empty like the room. And, frantically, a fog was cleared—and the space filled, the back of his mind spilling out into the rest of him, rife with repressed concerns.

No he wasn't. No he *wasn't*. *None of this was 'fine.'*

He was reaching a boiling point, yet shivers wracked his frame. Was he running a fever? A headache pounded behind his eyes, blunt and insistent. Without thinking, he turned back, notebook in hand. Without thinking, he ran out of the room.

He had to—

Go.

Bathroom. Quickly.

One door, two, three, four, *there*.

He had barely entered before he overbalanced with the leaning forward, his hand shooting up to a wall to steady himself. Sliding down. Getting a grip on the toilet.

His throat didn't want to cooperate, stomach clenching and unclenching in its desperate efforts. There was no way he could muffle the sound of retching, but that wasn't high on his priority list. He was salivating too much. He would choke on it if he wasn't *trying* to get it out. Cough, gag, spit. *Retch*.

There.

It was almost relieving, the moment he couldn't breathe and what had to happen, happened. It *burned*. His chest, his throat, his face. His eyesight was blurry. His nose burned with the scent of bile, tongue stuck with the aftertaste of it.

He tried to steady himself, breaths coming out in heaves and gasps. His hair fell in a messy arc around his face. Frantically, he tried to brush it back, push it aside. His stomach clenched, though he tried his best to swallow, unwilling to make a mess of himself. He bowed, overwhelmed. His eyes stung. He couldn't keep it down, but—

"Woah, hey hey hey there mate, I've gotcha."

A Voice whose softness was his identifying quality, and hands which reached from behind him to pull his hair back. Had Harri had any composure, he would've tried to say... something, anything, to Fer for the help. He was preoccupied, though.

Using what little lucidity he had, Harri took off his glasses and held them in offering to the space behind him. They were taken, and a comforting pat was offered to his shoulder.

He didn't say anything else as Harri expelled his stomach contents in front of him. His body tried for a round three, though the most his wrenching and heaving managed to pull up by that point was dry air and dignity, spat down with the rest of it. Fer patted him on the back through it. *Pat pat pat.*

"You're good, you've got it up," he said. Burning tears slid down Harri's face. "Take your time, now, just breathe. You've got it."

So the comfort and commendation went, until there was nothing else to expel. No food, no bile, no white air. *Pat pat pat.* Until he felt better, headache miraculously gone.

He leaned back, finally raising his head. He felt disgusting. Exhausted, too; the kind of exhaustion he felt throughout his whole body, not the kind of exhaustion that took him out of it. He could feel tremors throughout his muscles. His whole body had expended itself trying to drag his wandering mind back to it; now that it had him again, its vicelike grip refused to let him go. (Something to be expected, after a near-death experience.)

"You with— you alright, now? All done?" Fer corrected himself, voice still soft and slow. Harri nodded back, not wanting to use his vocal chords so soon after that experience. He put his hand on his shoulder, crouching down at his level. "Need anything?"

Besides the obvious? Harri couldn't quite make out Fer's expression, his world fallen away to nothing but blurred color. Still, he caught the impression of a shadow in the doorway, unsteadily glancing up and watching as Fer's head followed his line of sight.

"Wash your mouth at the very least," Oli advised, leaning in the doorway, tone not unkind. "You don't want to go around with your breath smelling like that."

"You'll feel better if you wash up, yeah." Fer nodded.

"So he feels better, yeah, that's what I meant." Oli answered, unnecessarily so. Harri wondered if he kept doing those interjections on purpose. He had to know how nongenuine they made him look.

That wasn't to say it wasn't sound advice. Harri stood to do just that. His legs weren't even shaking anymore. He ignored what he was feeling just a little longer, as he heard Oli talking to someone, as he brushed his teeth, as he felt Fer's gaze on him like a physical weight. He took his glasses back once his face was washed, but still Fer wasn't backing down.

"Here," Oli called his attention, and Harri turned to see him offering a cup of tea. He squinted, suspicious of the gesture, though Oli's grin held no hints of ulterior motive. He took it for what it was, without question. He needed to wash the taste from his mouth. Oli paused, blinking, as Harri took the first sip. "Chamomile, helps with digestion."

Harri hummed, glancing down into the cup. *Wait.* "We ran out of chamomile tea two days ago. You told Paco to put it on the list. Where'd you *get* this?"

"Ah, well, y'know," Oli stalled noncommittally. "I've got connections. Just pulled a few strings, called in a couple favors, is all."

If he doesn't have a stash hidden somewhere, it's *Ciro then*, Harri inferred. Only one person could make a supply run so fast on such short notice. Whatever *Ciro* wanted for it, Harri would procure it himself.

He took another sip. It was nice, if almost too sweet for his tastes. Tasted all the sweeter, with the knowledge of the effort put into obtaining it for his sake. The tension in his body loosened, just slightly, from his savoring of the experience.

He quieted down. For a blissful moment, things were just... silent.

"...I'm sorry," Fer said, breaking that tender silence too soon.

Harri cleared his throat as he spoke. "What?"

"It's been bad for all of us. I'm sorry I'm only here for you now."

It had only been a couple of days since everything started crumbling. Fernando could not be in more than one place at once. That was how things worked. And now it was Harri's turn.

"You're here now." That was a statement of fact.

"I am," Fer said, smiling.

"Then that's what matters."

Fer nodded, and the silence returned, again only briefly. Something nagged at him.

"I don't need help," Harri felt the need to add, appreciative as he was. The result would have been the same with or without them, wouldn't it?

"Well, you still have it," he said firmly, before, "what happened?"

Ah. There was the horror he had been feeling before. And a new, dawning realization: the notebook wasn't in his hands anymore. He dropped it. He *dropped it*. He started out the door at once, just in time for Oleander to turn the corner brandishing the cursed tome.

"Give that to me," he said, and Oli held it by its spine lightly, twirling it in his hands. Nando hovered at his side, trying to offer some help; a hand to hold, a shoulder to lean on.

"Bossman thinks he's on a solo-venture," Oli said cryptically. He flipped it around, scanning the cover. He hummed to himself, eyebrows raising. "Got a personalized note and everything? What's it say, do you think? You sure you don't gotta delegate it to us little guys, give *us* little lab rats a good race to run?"

"Don't open it," he warned, voice tearing on the irritated flesh of his throat. It was like pouring gasoline into a fire, he could see it in the gleam of Oli's eyes.

"I don't think *you* get to decide that right now." Oli grinned, almost sharp, almost wild. He opened the front cover, thankfully not looking yet, and Harri nearly lunged. He wasn't sure

what he looked like, but Fer had taken a step between them. "You're not too great at the *secrecy* thing, you know?"

"You... threw up from a book?" Fer inferred, glancing between Harrier and the book he refused to take his eyes off. He looked towards Oli, hands raised in uncertainty. "We shouldn't be hasty. If it has him shook up, we probably won't fare too better in reaction unless we know what we're getting into. We can at least ask a couple questions before threatening to steal it."

"Stealing is such an ugly word, think of it more as 'impromptu borrowing.'"

"That means the same thing," Harri protested, reaching for the book in Oleander's hands. He took a step back, holding the book in both his hands now that he knew it *was* important, jerking it above his head. "Give it back, *you* don't need to be reading that."

"And why not '*me*'? I read all sorts of things," Oli responded, raising his chin in mock offense.

"What's *in* the book?" Fer interjected to ask. He hesitated, then added, "we won't have to check by force if we already know."

"Ooh, smart," Oli grinned wider. He stared, expectant, at Harri. The silence itched at him, as did Oleander's eyes, tracking his movement like a wild animal's did. He hadn't stopped smiling, canines overpronounced in his grin, eyes sparkling as if to goad him into volunteering information. His sudden stillness was unnerving. He was being assessed, seized up.

We asked two questions, said the air around his head. Faint and unspoken. Social convention, rules never said but always known through implication. *Answer one, and you're out of the interaction. Simple exchange.*

"That's a breach of confidentiality," Harri retaliated. "You read the cover, it's entitled to me; to share it with the both of you would break Quiet's trust."

"I won't tell," Oli said, loosening his grip and twirling the book in his hands again. If he got cocky enough with his position, would he drop it outright? He glanced at Fer, smiling wider. "Will you?"

Fer seemed to freeze, glancing between them both. Abstaining from the vote.

"Neither of us will tell," Oli spoke for him. "So don't worry, champ, there's no chance of any of us getting *caught*. And if you don't get caught, there's no crime committed!"

"I don't think that's how it works..." Fer said.

"It's not," Harri agreed. "And I'm not playing these games with you. Not right now. This is serious."

"Am I laughing?" Oli asked, rhetorically.

"You sure are smiling a whole lot," Fer mumbled. Oli glared at him, then turned to Harrier.

"Listen. Cards out on the table? Show of hands, mine's looking a *liiittle* bit better than yours, here. I'm the one in control. And I'm not giving you this book back; I have no reason to," Oli told him flatly, face as dead as his tone, and Harri flinched. His grin returned, voice upturned and chipper with delight. "I can see that's not a popular idea! Unfortunately, it's *definitely* gonna be the case between us. Unless! You can explain to me why *only you* can have it, when you're *clearly* just about as ill-equipped to handle whatever it is this 'Suffocation' bit's about."

Fer inhaled, sharply. The sound masked Harri's involuntary reaction well enough.

"You know, I *could* just read it aloud for us merry few right here, right now, right in this bathroom. It has great acoustics. Up to you!"

"Bastard," was Harri's only real reply.

Oli grimaced, sucking in a breath, "ooh, that's not a good answer, buddy. Not inspiring a whole lot of collaborative thoughts in this ol' head of mine."

"I thought you'd stopped being an ass," Fernando said. Oli blinked, taking a halting step back so he no longer loomed in the doorway.

"I'm not 'being an ass,' I..." Oli said defensively. He glanced at the open book in his hand. Harri watched his eyes scan a few lines. He felt sick. Again. "This isn't 'being an ass,' Harri's the one trying to keep things from us. I'm running reconnaissance here. Anything we hide from each other now *will* come back and bite us; this whole charade we've got going only goes well if we're..."

Silence. Oleander's eyes stopped moving. Something in his expression pinched. Expectation.

"...on the same page," Harri completed the phrase, gritting his teeth.

"Yeah, exactly!" Oli cheered, blinking rapidly. He closed the book, raising it in one hand next to his head, shaking it invitingly like one might a box of dog treats. "Ex-act-ly. You're exactly right, my good friend. Last time we didn't have all the information we should've, *someone here* had to risk their neck doing the hard work of sneaking us out of a madhouse. How about we all stop letting ourselves get caught off-guard, yeah? Get some *communication* going."

Harri almost wanted to laugh. *Oleander*; talking about *open communication*? Did he honestly believe that would endear him to them? After getting such a reminder of what his name had been?

"That doesn't sound too bad of an idea, actually," Fernando agreed haltingly, putting a hand on Harrier's shoulder. "None of us have to go through anything alone, yeah? We can work together on this."

"Yeah. We're all friends here. Good friends," Oli dragged the word out, like reeling in a fish, or coaxing a prey animal into a snare. He blinked, slow and deliberate. He took a step

forward, leaning in expectantly, book held out just barely between them in offering. "So, you gonna answer some questions for us?"

Deep breath in. And out. *Fine*. He could at least control the flow of information that way.

"Sure," he agreed, moving to take the book from Oleander's hands. Oli met him halfway, then *shoved* the book past his hands and into his chest, pushing him back. His shoulder blades made contact with a wall.

He hadn't been expecting it. He wheezed as the wind was knocked out of him.

"What are you doing?!" Fer surged forwards, bodily moving Oli away. *Trying* to, Harri corrected himself. He was like a stone wall. "Oli, let him *go*."

"First question." Oli's grin was a baring of teeth, eyes overbright, hands still gripping hard the book's edges, creasing its cover and simultaneously pressing his weight into Harri's chest with it. "Why is our *Decider* describing what dying was like on *your* orders?"

Fer, over Oli's shoulders, stilled. "Wait, what?" His eyes moved to the cover of the book, firmly held at an angle despite Harri's struggle to keep it to himself. He clenched it tighter. *Fer* absolutely couldn't get a hold of it. Under no circumstances would Fer be able to stomach it. *No*. Then, that gaze of Fer's raised to meet Harri's own, incredulous and confused.

Harri opened his mouth to explain himself, but couldn't, still winded from the initial strike. Was his headache returning?

"Okay. Okay, if that's what's in it, then..." Fer started, shaking himself out of his dazed confusion. "Oli, give him some breathing room, he *said* he was going to explain it."

"Oh, he *said*, alright," Oli muttered, glaring down at him. His head tilted towards Nando's direction, but his eyes never left Harri's. "You're a terrible lie detector. No shame for it! You just gotta leave it to the pros to hash things out the old-fashioned way, sometimes."

"By slamming a sick man into a wall?"

"No, by calling his bluff— I *know* the angle you're playing at," Oli said, returning his focus to Harri. His expression was veiled, masked; teeth showing, two steps from dangerous. "It's a good one. It's the kind of thing I'd do, if I were in your situation. I give you this book, and you're thinking, 'at least if *I'm* the one answering questions, I can control the flow of information that way.' It's in your eyes, in the breath you took, in the way you reached forward. You want to cherrypick out all the unsavory details that make you look bad."

"Or," Fer defended, "we were getting him to comply with us by offering him this book as a token of trust."

"And then he can leave out his *part* in it." The words slithered from Oli's mouth, cautious and watchful and distrusting.

"I had no part in it," Harri corrected, trying to pull the book back towards his chest. "I never asked Quiet to do anything. He did this of his own will."

"Didn't you?" Oli pressed, roughly grabbing at the book. "Didn't you? Why's your name on the cover? Why'd he feel the need to write it out?"

For a moment, he considered declaring himself guilty so he'd stop feeling guilt.

Harri looked at him, and all the words he could have said turned to ash in his tongue. Because there was something wrong with Oli. There was no other way of putting it, something that was changing before his very eyes and setting a long-dormant part of his body on high alert. Anxiety, perhaps.

What am I looking at?

It couldn't have taken a second. His canines went *down*, an entire section that wasn't there before. Sharper and longer than they had any right to be. Were they not at an angle, they would've pierced his bottom lip.

No, not anxiety. *Fear*.

Harri was the fool of the year, clearly. There he was, trying to untangle impossibles in a way that made sense, and yet there were more impossibilities right in front of his eyes. A little below, even. Was there any point in defending himself? Clearly, the damaged trust was already irreversible.

All he had was conjectures. Maybe Quiet thought it would be useful. Maybe it was to pre-write answers to unasked questions. He didn't know. He didn't *want* Quiet to do it. Still, he was fighting with all the strength he had to keep the book safe with him.

And in the meantime, fluid (brown-orange in coloration, semi-translucent) dripped from the new teeth in Oli's mouth (people don't just *grow teeth!*). Harri didn't know much about animals, which Oli clearly was (and a lethal one at that), but he knew enough to recognize a danger.

"Maybe it was an accident," Fer said, voice less sure. Harri's heart sank, trying to discern if saying something would be in his favor or if it would spell his end. "It doesn't have to be malicious, it could just be a misunderstanding. A miscommunication. Quiet doesn't really know how to say 'no.' Harri couldn't have meant that."

"That's exactly the point I was about to make. You *asked*. Even if the words didn't leave your mouth, *you asked*," Oli insisted. He jerked the notebook back from Harri's chest long enough to point to it, enough to jab his finger on the cover. "Cause, aftereffect, place of said cause, that's how *you* write. Experiments and results? Mirrors only reflect what's standing in front of them, and Quiet felt an obligation to answer in a way you'd read best. You're a smart guy, aren't you? You like to *think* you are. Help me out here, do you have an idea what it all adds up to?"

Harri's mind whirled. Ultimately, Oleander's analysis was correct; it didn't matter, though. The degree of blame put on his shoulders for Quiet's breakdown was a subjective argument and didn't change the fact that Quiet had broken down in the first place. All it did was form a pit in his gut.

His mind had always been quicker than his mouth, as out of it came the one-word question, "so?"

He could have sworn Oli was leaning back slightly. Rearing back for a strike. He had to keep talking. If Oleander was listening, he wasn't attacking.

"So?" Fer repeated, voice tinged with a defensive, reactionary anger.

"So, where does that leave us? In the same place we started," Harri said, risking a glance towards him, trying to appeal to practicality and logic. "You don't trust me to be honest, and I don't trust you to handle the contents of this book. We're at an impasse."

Oli opened his mouth, and Fer took him by the shoulders, using his engagement in the conversation as a distraction to catch him off-guard and pull him back. The book slipped from his grasp at once, securely back with Harri. He held it tight to his chest, ignoring how coldly it settled there and how his hands were going white and numb from his death-grip. There was no way he was letting Fer look at it.

"If it gets you to explain what the *hell's* going on," Fer started, his stare towards Harri hardening into skepticism. He turned that stare onto Oli at his side. His mouth was normal again, like Harri had imagined it. He licked his lips, inconspicuous as could be, and swallowed thickly. "Then someone's going to have to take a leap of faith. We have to *trust each other*."

"But—" Oli whined.

"No," Fer interrupted. "I'm *tired* of all this infighting. We're all united by the same common goal here. We all just want to help Quiet. We don't have to keep giving each other grief for every misstep, we're dealing with enough as-is.

"Listen. I'm not happy about the implications of that book. But I'm more unhappy about the fact that Quiet was writing it alone, without any of us there to help him, than I am about the idea that he was intending to share it with someone. I'd rather *one of us* know he's struggling than *none of us*. Because then, if we're comfortable communicating, *all of us* can chip in to help.

"If you do try and hide something," Fer warned, taking a deep breath, "then we'll have a problem. But until we cross that bridge, we're all friends. Got it?"

"What about Borja? Felipe?" Oli asked, voice... oddly smaller.

"What about them?" Fer responded. Was Oli seriously comparing *Harri* to the likes of *those two*? He glanced at Oli, facial expression shifting from a detached infuriation at the mention of their names to something soft and reassuring. "Those two crossed major lines before we had to kick them out, mate. They *made us* make that hard choice, because they decided 'helping Quiet' meant something totally different from how the rest of us see it."

"Quiet's digging up the dirt of his graves on Harri's word," Oli warned. "That doesn't look great on a performance review."

"Yeah," Fer agreed, shooting a fleeting glance at Harri. He exhaled harshly. "Not a fan of that. But we can figure that out."

They would. They had to, at the end of the day. There were no other options.

It had taken a while for him to get out of bed. Dami was glad Quiet had gotten some rest, he looked like he needed it. He seemed much happier today! Less... twitchy, and distant. Ave had watched him clear his plate for lunch — unfortunately, not anything special, since the house was getting low on groceries and Paco said he couldn't make anything with what he had on hand. Dami could agree. They were out of fruit, and tangerines were in season. But Quiet didn't seem to mind.

But she had to act quickly. She could not let this chance escape her! She took a deep breath, hiking up her shoulders in the very picture of confidence, and bravely made her way over to where he sat at the head of the table.

She stalled, for a moment, hands pausing in the air from where she'd started to reach to tap him on his shoulder. No, wait, that might be... her eyes darted to the wings at his back. She wrung her hands together. Maybe she should just...?

"Um... I have a question?" she asked, all of a sudden timid.

Quiet's head raised before he turned. The wing at the side closest to her turned with the movement, opening slightly from how it'd been folded, as if to welcome in the space between him and her. He smiled as he made eye contact, expression softening. His head tilted to the side like a puppy, soft locks of hair like feathers following the motion, falling around and framing his face. "Yes?"

She opened her mouth again, realizing she'd forgotten to practice this part. And out came, instead of what she meant to ask, "you're pretty."

Quiet blinked, taken aback.

"I mean!" Dami stuttered. "Your hair! Your hair is pretty, and different from anyone's I've ever seen. And you keep it very natural. Which is good, it looks good, but... if you don't mind... I'd like to try styling it for you?"

The silence which followed was just a little deafening. Quiet's expression hadn't changed. Should she take it back?

He cleared his throat—

"You better take up that offer before she starts charging you!" Winnie called, rapidly making her way over to the pair. "She's a *professional*, you know. You're lucky she's not charging you her premium rate."

She was? She could be, she realized with a blink. She had no studies to speak of, but she also had *time*.

Quiet broke eye contact to glance at Winnie. Dami looked behind her, too. Her hair was still... kind of... in a braid, she'd done for her earlier. Days earlier. It was sweet, in a way, that she hadn't taken it out or undone any of Dami's work, even if time would do it eventually. Or maybe she wanted it to look like that...

It was not healthy for the hair itself, though. Especially one as curly as hers.

"My hair?" Quiet repeated, and Dami looked back at him, nodding enthusiastically.

"I think you'd look good with a braid." There weren't many complicated things she could do yet, she didn't have the knowledge. But their hair might be just the right length for...

Minutely, Quiet nodded. His voice was small, oddly choked up. "Yeah. That'd be nice."

Tabi had invited herself along, reading while perched on the windowsill. That position couldn't be comfortable. She was turning pages multiple times a minute. How did she do that? At this rate she'd have no book to enjoy in an hour.

Winnie had also invited herself along. To her surprise, she and Quiet were talking.

"I understand," he told her. "Sometimes I don't remember myself when I wake up, either."

She was holding a flower Quiet had given her to 'practice,' the same kind some of the boys had on when she met them face to face. So far, the flower had one vine and one orange fruit struggling to reach its proper size. As long as the plants didn't grow inside her again...

But that was over! And this was now! Dami, overeager, took Quiet's hand in hers without thinking. He stood a little straighter at that, glancing down and then back up at her just as fast. "You're taller than me, so you'll have to sit on the floor, is that okay?"

"Floor's not so bad," Winnie interjected. She sometimes sat on the floor, instead of the couch with everyone else, back at... the place they came from. Dami chose to believe it was before she just preferred the floor. Though she'd been sitting less on the floor and more with Dami and Tabi, in recent weeks. She was still the most experienced floor-sitter Dami knew. She had the credentials.

Quiet laughed a little under his breath, glancing at Tabi. "Yeah. I think I can manage sitting on the floor for a couple hours."

And then he did. And Dami settled on a seat behind him. And— *oh gracious she's really doing this, okay*. Okay. "I'm just going to comb it to start, I think."

"You're the expert," Quiet affirmed. A slight pause. "Can I move while you work, or...?"

"Just... try to keep your head still?" Dami requested, unsure. She just didn't want to pull his hair on accident, or something. "You can adjust besides that, I don't mind."

"Oh," Quiet said, his tone a bit surprised. He moved his arms around freely as if testing her claims. "Okay. Nice."

Carefully, then, Dami started. She wasn't sure what to expect with Quiet. Different people had different reactions to getting their hair groomed. Tabi was more nonchalant, while Winnie tended to whine and groan while Dami got everything ready only to *then* whine and groan whenever Dami said she was finished. She claimed she hated the waiting and that it was boring, but she never complained when Dami was actually working. Dami hadn't told Winnie yet, but she tended to... hum? Whenever her hair was getting brushed. Dami was pretty sure she enjoyed it, which made her reluctance to brush her own hair a bit strange; maybe she only liked it when other people were brushing her hair? Dami *had* offered to teach her, once. She'd scoffed at her.

Quiet was tense at the start. She politely ignored how he ducked when she first touched his scalp. She'd have to give him more warning than that, then. He seemed to calm down once she started in earnest, though.

She was glad she had experience with wavy and curly hair, otherwise she would have wondered if it was supposed to look like that more than she already did. She was definitely not knowledgeable enough to do anything but style. Haircut? Not a chance. Especially without consulting first.

Dami's mind took to idle curiosities as she worked. "What shampoo do you use?"

"Uh..." Quiet stalled. "I don't know. Something for curly hair, I think."

"He smells like something you'd pull out of the oven, Dami," Winnie commented. Her nose twitched. It didn't sound like it to the common ear, but that was a Winnie-branded compliment. "Must come from the shampoo, he didn't smell like it before."

"Pardon?" Tabi questioned.

"I put cinnamon in my cocoa every morning and the jar we have it in always makes it cloud up a little," Quiet explained. *Add that to the list of things he needs for his room...*

"Your hair is really clean. It's shiny and full," Dami complimented. Bodied, not patchy; the fibres of it were strong. "Kind of like your feathers."

Quiet made a noncommittal humming noise that was not like the humming Winnie took to. More conversational than not.

"Speaking of," Winnie said, leaning in from the upside-down position she'd taken to sitting down on the couch with. At least she wasn't sitting on the *top* of the couch and letting her legs dangle down the back of the seat again. "While Dami's working on the top, you think you wanna give a go at styling those wings of yours?"

Quiet went silent. Still, too. Dami stopped, too.

...He wasn't going to answer, was he?

Tabi closed her book with a snap. "Winnie, would *you* like someone grabbing your tail? No? Then there's your answer."

Winnie flustered, tail flicking behind her as her hackles rose. “I—!”

“No, I... I don’t...” Quiet murmured, haltingly, “think I want that.”

Dami couldn’t look Quiet in the eyes at the angle she was at. She wished she could. “Then we won’t. Not a single person in this room will touch your wings. Promise.”

Quiet’s wings folded in, around towards their front, just a bit. Enough that the tips of their flight feathers would be covering their face, if Dami were looking at them from anywhere else but behind. “...Promise.”

“You’re good on Dami’s word,” Tabi added, *her* position actually allowing her to make eye contact. Quiet seemed to be avoiding it. She shrugged breezily. “And if anyone tries, I can always just strangle them.”

She *was* the tallest one here.

“I don’t doubt it. You have great upper body strength.”

Tabi took a moment to process that. Her gaze sharpened. “Then you know no one’s getting close to you unless *you* want them to.”

Quiet nodded; to her, to himself, maybe both.

Dami spun the comb in her hand anxiously. “Is it okay if I get back to work now?”

“The way you said that just reminded me of someone...” Quiet mumbled. He leaned back a little, tipping his head back as he did. She could see his eyes peeking up at her at this angle. Trying to invite her. “Go on.”

“I actually need you to look down for a second for this next part.”

“Ah.”

Diversion settled, Dami could get back to work. She made extra careful to tell Quiet what she was doing before she did it, now — and was *extra* extra gentle when asking Quiet to move this way or that. She wondered if she was making it awkward for him to keep talking to Winnie.

“How come your Gracie over here gets a thread and the rest of us don’t, huh? I smell favoritism.”

“Do *you* want a thread?” Quiet sounded outright incredulous. Dami could see half of the expression he was making to match it, though she needed him to look in the direct opposite direction to fix up the right side of his head. So many flyaways...

“No! I didn’t say that!”

“You implied it.”

“You read too much into things!”

“I kind of have to, you know.”

She didn’t know what to do with the baby feathers she found in a few places, but as long as it didn’t hurt...

“With every one of us!” Winnie retorted.

Quiet glanced at Tabi.

She pressed her lips together, in the way Dami knew it meant she was trying to suppress a smile. “Not all the time.”

“Oh, like you’re so special! You’re just painfully honest.”

“I prefer the term: blunt.” Tabi argued, book forgotten in her lap for the time being. “Of course he reads me well. He knows I’m the favorite.”

Winnie did not say anything to that.

Tabi cleared her throat. “After Grace, I meant.” And back into her book she went.

“How do you manage to make these flowers, anyway?” Winnie asked.

“Oh, just...” Quiet cupped his hands and brought them to his face. The hair in Dami’s hands felt— *different*, for a second. Her brain skipped like a record, entire plan for what to do next elegantly derailed. *That’s not hair*. She froze. ...*What is it, then?*

She heard him breathing, exhaling. It was the only thing she was hearing. For a room with four people in it, it felt suddenly empty for all the noise in it. Like he was the only thing here.

And his hands pulled away. And in them...

“What?!” Winnie screeched, diving down on the floor and crawling over to get a better look at the little blossom in his hands. It was glowing, pretty and pale. The faint light reflected in Winnie’s eyes, almost seemed to make her glow in turn.

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing!” Winnie protested as the faint light dimmed, and left in Quiet’s hands was a little flower infused with something indescribable and born of nothing; nothing possible, that was. If Dami and the others hadn’t watched him breathe it into his hands, it wouldn’t have seemed all that remarkable.

Dami still would’ve thought it looked pretty, though. It had an intricate pattern to it. And it didn’t hurt anyone. It bloomed free of blood. It was innocent.

“Can you do that with only flowers?” Tabi asked, leaning forward.

“I haven’t tried with much else,” Quiet answered easily. Could he make different flowers?

“Oh! Can I braid some into your hair?” Dami asked in a rush.

Winnie perked up at that. “I suppose I could use that for... practice, for my own sake. In *my* interests.”

“Better on me than you.”

Right, she was braiding hair, not witnessing miracles. She had priorities! So Dami tried to not watch Winnie making the strangest flowers she had ever seen. She was sure flowers weren’t supposed to look like that, or having a spiral of petals till the center. Or looking all stretched out. Clearly, it was harder than it looked. Winnie didn’t look too happy about that.

Dami hummed to fill the silence. “What’s your favorite color?”

“I don’t know. There’s so many.” His voice went almost excited at that.

Dami had to agree. When she had woken up the first time, the sunlight beaming through the windows was like music, the pale sky like a rainbow to her. Even the green of the trees had been like a dream to her. “What about... if you *had* to pick one?”

“What happens to the ones I don’t pick?”

“Nothing! Just that, if you pick a special one,” she had to stop herself from singing the words too cheerily, “then something special might happen.”

“...That’s a bit ominous.”

Tabi finally lifted her gaze from her book. “Just answer the question.”

“And here I thought you didn’t like smalltalk,” Quiet said, before falling silent for a moment. Tabi rolled her eyes at him, not unkindly. Quietly, he answered, “...Blue.”

Winnie looked up from her tragically lopsided flower. “Why?”

“There’s not really a *bad* blue thing. Not like there is with red. I never really saw it until we made it here, when I saw the sky the first time. I was wondering where all the stars went. I was really worried. I thought... Well, it turns out they only come out at night, so that was a relief. I just can’t think of a *bad* blue thing... not a single thing. It’s all just so peaceful.”

Dami decided to share hers, too. “...I like red.”

Quiet glanced back at her. “You asked me why. Explain *your* answer.”

“Well... you said there are bad red things. But there are also good red things, too.”

“Like what?” Winnie prompted.

“Like apples!” Dami answered just as promptly. “They’re sweet and tart and delicious. Fruit in general—it’s very colorful! Baking is kind of like art, isn’t it? But whenever a baked good is red, then that means it’s going to taste *especially* good. Plenty of good-tasting food is red.”

“Some meat is red,” Avellano chimed in, passing through with a veritable mountain of pillows in his arms. There was no way he could see where he was going.

Wait, he can't see that!

Dami panicked a little bit, asking Quiet to tilt his head down even though she had absolutely no reason to do so. He obliged with so much trust she felt a little bad for lying, fussing with his hair semi-aimlessly. She actually needed the top of his head to start a new braid. Maybe she could just... pretend she was doing... something...

“I’ve seen what you eat,” Winnie said, not bothering to hide the disgust in her tone, “you must like yours still mooing.”

Ave perked up. “Did you know that if you moo at a cow, it gets curious and comes towards you?”

“How do you know that?” Quiet said. Ave mouthed a quick ‘sorry’ once he realized Dami’s predicament and took off out of the room. Quiet called after the sound of retreating footsteps. “Avellano, how do you know that?”

“He didn’t deny what I said...”

“Well, he was right,” Dami said, moving the conversation right along. The less they lingered on Ave’s appearance the better. “Some... meat...”

...Her hands stalled and dropped.

Some meat was rotten. Decomposing. She glanced down, at her hands, her hands covered in it. It splattered on her dress. She couldn't get it off, she couldn't get it off, she couldn't get out—the door wouldn't open, and downstairs, he just—he kept bloating, and his chest—the smell—

Nausea. Noise from the TV in the other room.

A sharp sting on her arm. Red, welling in a line on her wrist, harsh and real and alive. She can bleed. She can die. Relief poured on her like icewater.

“...Not all red things are bad,” she found herself saying. Quiet’s head had righted itself; he was glancing back at her, actually.

“Red dresses, red lipstick...” Tabi listed. For someone who didn’t like smalltalk she was paying a lot of attention to them. Dami resolved to make Quiet and her sister be in the same room more often. “Ava’s horns are tipped red, aren’t they?”

Dami’s cheeks felt red, as well. *Ava would look good in a color-coordinated outfit. Like that.*

Quiet hummed. “Gonchi’s thread, too.”

Him too.

Tabi blinked at that. Once again the book went to the wayside, discarded in exchange for a notebook she hastily wrote something down in. “The threads have colors?”

“Er— yeah. I guess that explains why you haven’t said you like yellow yet,” Quiet answered.

“Harri’s, I assume.”

“Right.”

Tabi underlined something, tapping her pencil on the page with a bit of excess energy. “I don’t hate the look of yellow.”

“I’m sure Harri will be thrilled to know that.”

Tabi wasn’t really one to get red, Dami realized. A bit, but not like her. That seemed unfair. When was it going to be her chance to call Tabi a tomato? She just smiled proudly and owned it when others tried to tease her. Most of the time. Ghosts notwithstanding. (Could Dami learn that superpower?)

“You know, apples can also be green, too,” Quiet mentioned.

“Eugh,” Winnie gagged, scoffing. “No thank-you. Anything that reminds me of that little cretin’s eyes is something I’m not interested in.”

“Winnie, I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” Tabi started, “but your eyes are green.”

“Did I stutter?”

“Not funny,” Dami said to shut that down.

“Mjm. That’s just nonsense,” Quiet agreed. “You look beautiful.”

That was a way to shut that conversation. Winnie pulled back as if struck. “What?! What do you mean by that?”

Quiet shrugged. “It’s the truth.” Winnie sputtered wordlessly. That was another nice red thing right there: *her* face.

“‘Our choicemaker’ sticks to his beliefs,” Tabi teased, flipping through her notebook. She smirked a little. A little mean. “He thought that when he first saw you, too.”

Quiet rolled his eyes, making Dami miss on the strand she had been about to grab. “You told me the color you hate, but what’s one you like?”

It took a little while for Winnie to form words again. “Purple.”

“Very royal,” Tabi drawled playfully, but stopped herself short of elaborating.

“Think what you want!” She crossed her arms with a huff. “It’s just as far from green as you can get, is all.”

“Defining what you like based off the things you hate is... a choice.”

“Still *my* choice.”

“Hey there,” Tabi greeted, and Dami glanced up to see who was entering the roo— oh, Cain had already entered. He just stood there. “Not interested in talking, then?”

“Oh! Hi! Sorry, I didn’t see you,” Dami tried, smiling. He waved. Her hands were a little busy at the moment to wave back. She hoped he didn’t mind.

“That’s fine,” he told her. Oh! He hadn’t said anything to her in a while. Hadn’t really paid attention to her, really.

With everything that was going on, that was— alright. Understandable! She’d wanted to ask him his opinion on her and Ava’s redecoration project at some point— she’d gotten around to everyone else— but, well. He wasn’t... very accessible.

He... still wasn’t paying attention to her. Not even a glance. He looked her sister in the eyes, she just saw it.

Had she done something to offend him?

“What do *you* want?” Winnie spat.

“Just curious, is all. It’s natural to be attracted to the sound of conversation,” Cain said. Was he... going to... sit down, or...?

Dami glanced down to Quiet. He seemed fine, just looking ahead, but... she scooted a little closer to him, just in case. She twiddled with the braid she was working on, nervous.

“Oh, so you want to converse?” Tabi snapped her book shut. It sounded final. Her voice was cold. “I’ll start: *what did you do to him?*”

Cain didn’t really react to the question. He just answered it. “Nothing he didn’t want.”

“Ohoho, is *that* the case?” Tabi leaned forward. Her voice was a smile which did not reflect in her expression. “Alright. I’ll play along if it gets a straight answer out of you. What did Harri ‘want’ so bad? *Both* times.”

Briefly, Dami wondered if she and Quiet should go to another room. Neither of them liked conflict so close. He visibly seemed to deflate as he realized what the next few minutes would turn into.

Cain seemed to take his sweet time answering that one. He leaned in just slightly. “Shouldn’t you know? You’ve been pushing for the same thing.”

“Yeah, no. You see: *I* asked *you* a question,” Tabi said, leaning back and clicking her tongue. Her face looked remarkably unimpressed. “I’m not going to sit up and run a little performance for you if you won’t entertain me back.”

“I suppose that’s fair,” Cain agreed, also correcting his posture. He glanced, briefly, in Dami’s direction. Staring down, instead. “I’m more interested in what’s happening here.”

“None of your business,” Winnie answered for Dami.

“Um—!” That was rude. It wasn’t like he couldn’t tell, anyway! Dami decided to try to seize the moment. A bit awkward, but Winnie taught her a thing or two about scheming right under people’s noses. “Well, you caught me at a bit of a bad time, but I was wondering if I could—”

—aaand he wasn’t looking at her, again. “...if I could... excuse me?”

Was he doing that on purpose? It was like she wasn’t even in the room!

“Are those supposed to be flowers?” Cain commented, glancing at Winnie’s collecting pile. His eyes trailed their contours with something like amusement. “You ought to leave that to someone who knows what they’re doing. Those belong on no one’s body.”

And then he tried to walk forward, to examine them. Keyword: tried.

Tabi put a hand up. “Ah ah ah ah, there’s fine,” she warned. To his credit, Cain did stop, if just to appreciate the gesture. From what she knew of him, he could keep walking at any moment.

Cain glanced back to Winnie’s little garden. “What an odd change. You’re worse at this now than you were as a flowerbed.”

Dami sucked air between her teeth. She didn’t mean to.

Cain hummed, reaching a hand out. Winnie stared at him. “Do... do you really expect me to *hand one over* to you after you *insult* me?”

“I suppose I could just take it.”

“Move any closer and I will bite you.” Her entire body was tense. Even her tail.

“Yes, well, that’s a familiar one,” Cain sighed, dropping his hand. “I’d hoped you’d be able to show us something like the scene you caused earlier. We missed it the first time.”

Cain glanced over to Quiet. Dami finished the braid she was working on. It wasn’t as clean as the others, but she needed her hands free. “A shame. You do keep missing the best parts of our visits back here.”

Quiet did not dignify that with a response.

Cain glanced up. At her. At Dami. She froze; she wasn’t expecting it. “You *could* describe it to us, you know.”

She had wanted to say ‘you’re being rude,’ but that thought fizzled and died. Shock went through her like a lighting bolt. She shouted, “no!”

She wasn’t expecting that. Her hands raised to cover her mouth. She shouldn’t have spoken without thinking. From the immediate tilting of Cain’s head, he hadn’t expected it either. “Oh. What a pity. It must’ve been really bad, then.”

Was... was he...? Dami nodded forcefully. “It— it was! It really— it was so—”

“It wasn’t anything worth talking about,” Tabi interrupted, fixing a *Look* at Dami.

What? What did she do wrong? ...She hadn’t even considered if Winnie was okay with it. “I — I’m sorry.”

“I’m right here!” Winnie reminded them, eyes flashing.

“So you are. Very... energetic. You bounced back from being bedbound faster than most. Good job.” Cain regarded her for a moment, then asked with just as much interest, “can you still feel it inside you?”

“*Seriously?*” Tabi hissed.

“What?” Cain asked, turning right towards Tabi as she spoke. Why didn’t he do the same for her? “Is that not an important question to ask? She would know if there’s something still growing beneath her skin.”

“You *wish* you could get under my skin. You cowards are all the same. I’m not so easily caught up in your schemes!” Winnie hissed.

Cain glanced at her. “Do I? I didn’t say anything of the sort. I just wonder what it was like... Oh, I doubt you were much aware when this one over here started burning your skin—”

“I’m sorry,” Dami said once more, for good measure.

“—but the unraveling beforehand sounds interesting.”

It was not. It was not interesting or intriguing, it was scary! It was terrifying! Dami thought she was seeing her friend die right before her eyes! The sprouting and the leaves and the blood...

Cain seemed to consider something new. “Was it like the first time we killed you?”

“Would you *shut up?*”

All eyes in the room turned to the man sitting by Dami’s lap. All eyes in the room brushed right past Dami as if she were not there, were not relevant, staring instead at Quiet who had spoken up for the first time since Cain had entered the room in the first place, with flowers in their hair and wings folded around them which were placed and kept safe by her hands.

Blink and you miss it, because Dami did; she'd seen the rest of them turn, but it was if Cain was staring at Quiet all along. *Through* them.

In a tone like a smile, he said, "make me."

And all the pressure in the room turned inwards at once. She couldn't tell. Couldn't see. Couldn't hear. Intuition told for her of an impression in the air; air which chose to stand still, the sound falling to the law of its inertia. *Silence*.

[Remain silent.]

Cain followed. For a moment, all was silent; for a moment, all was still. His eyes did not move. His body did not move. For all the material of the world, it was as though she were in the mere audience of a stage; all else fallen away into the Fabric and the Flow and the Center. And him, alone, in its sights. Disembodied.

Where were his eyes? It was so dark.

The moment passed. The pressure gave.

Cold eyes stared through the ending of a world.

Quiet pulled back. Into Dami, into her arms incidentally, and their wings with them— she pulled back her arms, *wait no I'm sorry I didn't mean to*— but they didn't flinch forward. Maybe they knew. Cain mirrored the movement, watching. The room's temperature dropped.

Quiet blinked. His expression twitched, disturbed from the release for a matter of a second, a slight jerk pulling at his shoulders. He regarded Cain again, eyes distant and voice layered in the texture of monotone. As though his next words were read from an unseen script: "*We'll wait and see how things play out.*"

Cain nodded, and Quiet's eyes blew open as they froze in place. "If we say so."

And he was gone.

Like nothing came in at all.

Harri held the book in his hands. Closed. Safe and sound. Safe in his hands.

Fer turned to Harri properly, glancing down. "If Quiet didn't give that to you, where'd you even find it?"

"His room," Harri answered easily. "Was trying to do measurements."

"Oh, perfect," Oli clapped, already walking out the door. "I was looking for an excuse for us to get out of this bathroom, it's so *cramped*. Come on, come on, let's take a walk together."

Harri glanced at the empty cup of tea left on the sink. *Can't leave that here. It's rude*. He picked it up. Oli, having noticed the others hadn't started following his lead yet, glanced back

to see Harri holding the book tucked under his arm, the cup in his hand.

Oli glanced at Harri again, back to Fer, then back to Harri.

And Harri froze up. His muscles didn't want to work. They didn't push him awake when Oleander walked near and took the cup from him in both hands. Like he hadn't threatened Harri not five minutes ago. The motion was intentional. Almost gentle. Deceit, it had to be. Play-acting, pretending as he smiled that his shut teeth didn't hide something sharper in the roof of his mouth.

"I can relieve you of that burden." A pause, the slightest silence between them. Harri's heartbeat was loud in his ears. Almost deafening. "You know, social graces aren't your strong suit."

"Interrogations aren't yours," Harri replied, the thought bypassing his filter entirely.

"I think that one's up for debate," Oli said casually as he sized Harri up. Harri didn't take his eyes off him, wondered at the way he was standing. He couldn't tell anything from it. What did Oli read from it?

Oli took a step forward, towards him; Fer let him go, soft eyes watching the pair, warring between wariness and trust. He reached, not to take the book from him, but to put a hand on his shoulder. Oli blinked, not deliberately, just naturally. He smiled, the expression so practiced it fit his face like a mask. "A tip from a friend, then? Some humility will take you a long way. No one likes a guy who acts like he has all the answers, especially to things going on in their head. Get on the right foot again. Apologize for what you've done."

That was *rich* coming from him. The Opportunist, *backstabber* of all people, talking about friends and apologies.

... Was Oli still talking about Quiet? His tone seemed euphemistic; another conversation was happening between them. Harri missed the tone switch. He didn't catch the angle.

Oli's hand left Harri's shoulder as he leaned back, putting a respectable distance between them again. He raised his hands in a placating gesture. "And, in my opinion, if you're gonna handle answers you don't want to read or hear or talk about like *this*," Oli gestured to the bathroom around them, still smelling partially of sickness and saltwater, "then maybe stop asking so many questions."

For a moment, his lungs were filled with saltwater, and he couldn't *see*. His blood ran cold, cold, colder. He couldn't see. It was so dark, so cramped, flooding so fast.

Only for a moment.

Less than the longest second of his life. A flash, like a lightning strike in the distance, thunder not yet arriving. (A memory?)

"That's not an option," he choked out in response.

Oli blinked, then shrugged. "If you say so."

Oli spun around and continued his rambling as if the interlude between them hadn't occurred, "you can show us where you found this book of yours. I'm more of a hands-on sort of guy, a real visual learner, an example will do us some real good in understanding all this."

"It'd be good to check if there's..." Fer joined back into the discussion, trailing off a second. He swallowed. "Anything else he's hiding, I guess."

"Well, I wouldn't go *that* far," Oli dissuaded, glancing behind him as he walked. Harri was almost impressed with his sense of ethics, before he continued, "you're likely to leave evidence behind. Not practiced in snooping like I am; I've been in and out of your rooms more times than I can count."

"Are you joking?" Fer asked, the pace of his step slowing a second as he stumbled.

"That's the magic." Harri could hear the lilt like a smile in Oli's voice. "You'll never know."

Oli stopped walking so abruptly it was a wonder they didn't crash into him. His head jerked to the right, knees bent as though he was about to jump away.

It didn't take Harri long to realize why. Those footsteps, he knew. The noise they made, the intervals between each. Rapid, slamming on the ground hard and lifting quick after. And then the noise peetered out, not like the slowing of steps, but like the ground just stopped connecting; the whistling of winds, displaced air.

There weren't more rapid footsteps yet something (someone) was still coming, Harri could see it in the way Oli tensed his shoulders for a second, stepping away. And then, in a blink, there was *Ciro*.

In the next, there he was again, Oli having taken several long steps back as if preparing for a strike and *Ciro* having also taken several long steps—in utter disregard of Oli, towards Harri instead. Oli glanced in the right direction and breathed a sigh of relief, his hand reaching for his heart to check his pulse.

In the meantime—"what the fuck is wrong with you?"

Harri happened to correct his posture at the same time as Oli. He took a step back from *Ciro*, who'd taken up a fair bit of his personal space in an attempt to assess him for signs of weakness. "Nothing now, I'm fine," he answered.

Oli poorly disguised the word "liar" among a long series of coughs, the opposite of subtle.

Not that *Ciro* was in need of it, they shared a space, he should have known he could read Harri as much as Harri could read him. He squinted at him. "Sure you are."

It really was nothing to worry about. Not that Harri thought that telling him that would help any, when he got like that. "Just a stomach bug."

"Harri, you're a really, *really* bad liar," Nando said.

"Psh, like *you're* any better?" Oli mocked beside him.

Ciro hadn't stopped staring at Harri, apparently gauging the way his head tracked the flow of conversation, scanning for information. Searching for details. He sighed, and Harri's gaze snapped to him.

"You're back to normal."

Harri did not have any idea what *Ciro* was referring to, but if it got him off his case, then it got him off his case. "Sure am. I was also in the middle of something, before you interrupted."

Ciro was either bad with social cues or deliberately ignoring the very clear dismissal. "I'll join you," he said, and so he did.

It was a minor miracle Quiet wasn't nearby to suspect the party of four heading off to snoop in his room. Or, as *Ciro* explained, *not* a miracle, but the product of purposeful labor and misdirection. The girls' idea, he said; and Oli's head snapped to attention, but there were more pressing matters than *with who* and *where* and *for how long now?* Harri had to show them where the book was found.

A door later, there they were. Not that there was much room to hide anything in the first place. A bed, a bureau, and a loose floorboard.

There was recognition in Nando's gaze, when he showed them that last thing.

"This isn't," Harri choked back... something, "this isn't something any of us should have to know."

"Why? Quiet already told us he died more times than we remember." Fer reminded him. "Like it or not, we *do*."

"Not like this," he sighed, his breath rough on his scratchy throat. Not with detail, not unprompted, not with apologies scribbled out. Not when he could track their deterioration by the strokes of the pen. ~~Not so many times he couldn't give a number. Not so horribly that they all embraced their end come the finale.~~ He shivered. "There's a difference between seeing the scars and knowing how they got there. *This*," he waved the book in his off-hand, "isn't just a catalogue of *ways* he died. The first page is misleading. It's how he processed the trauma after, too; the disorientation of the next loop."

"I could have told you that," Fer muttered to himself. Not low enough.

"You weren't there for everything."

"Yes he was!" *Ciro* blurted out. "That's the point."

"I was," Fer bit back, emboldened. "I can't remember, but I *was*."

It was an irrational response. Objectively speaking, Fer *wasn't* there for everything; he didn't go through everything Quiet did, he didn't experience it, he didn't remember it. Not in their perception of continuity. No one in their group, no one in *the world*, knew what Quiet had

gone through except for Quiet himself; that was what made the book in his hands such an asset, and so revolting at the same time.

If Fer didn't *remember*, how could he say *he* was the one there? How could he reconcile that belief with the separation of Oleander, from his other-self's potential mutiny in 'Thorn?' How could he reconcile it with Ava's transformation into 'Fury?' How could he reconcile it with ~~himself, and everyone, all of them Wrong~~

"Do you think I'm that fragile I wouldn't be able to take that?" Fer asked, his tone as chilled and tempered as Harri's bloodstream.

At the end of the day, *yes*. Fer cared too much. That protective defensiveness proved as much. Under no circumstances would he be able to stomach it. ~~Fer died. Harri never wanted to see him in the states he saw on that screen, ever.~~ But Harri chose not to say it.

And he wasn't about to give it to Oli of his own free will.

"*Sooo*," Oli drawled out the word, slowly, "you're telling me, it's *not* 'psychosomatic,' like you assumed."

Harrier paused. Could it still have been...? He doubted it. ~~'Result: Longest return to movement.'~~ *Regardless*, it was as real as it could get, from Quiet's perspective. It was hard to understate the alleged 'peace' of drowning, though in his experience, he couldn't call it such. (What experience? ...Circle back to that thought later.)

"Accept it, 'detective,'" Oli's tone was borderline gleeful. "You *can* be wrong."

"I never denied the possibility," he conceded. Even if that wasn't the point.

"That's not the point," Fer interjected. He moved in front of Harri, holding him by both his shoulders yet still at arm's length. The eye contact he was making was... intense. Demanding, insistent. (Worried.) "What shook *you* up so bad, about what's in there, that we all ended up here?"

It wasn't the content in itself, not really. Not the deaths. The notebook did make some things about Quiet's beliefs clear.

"He thinks," Harri started, then cut himself off, throat scratchy and mouth dry. The word 'deserve' ... many, many, many times, it was repeated. None of them correct. Only the first scratched out. "He thinks he deserves it."

There was worse. There was *worse*. But... that was a starting point. The easiest thing to focus on.

The air was humming.

Oli stilled. "Run that by me again? Deserves what, dying? Are you serious?"

Ciro, running opposite of what he expected, curled into himself a little. "I hate being right."

But Harri wasn't watching them. He was watching Fer. His expression... twisted, yes; it wasn't pleasant. Something between sorrow and wrath, it showed a certain degree of genuine hurt over the words... but like *Ciro*, it lacked surprise, or realization. There was a solemn look in his eyes, devoid of shock. He looked like he was expecting to hear it. He looked like he'd been waiting for it, if not consciously.

"Old news for you, I take it," Harri tested. (*Now* who was hiding information?)

"Wasn't hard to figure out, after he said what happened before us," Fernando said. The euphemistic, indirect language did not go unnoticed. Everyone in the room understood what he meant. The detachment when speaking of it was for his own sake.

"Who taught him that?" Before properly watching Oli, Harri had never thought a smile could look scary.

"It was her," Fer ground out through gritted teeth. "It all comes back to her."

Harri wondered if Fer could feel the weight of the stares. He would have leaned on the wall if he wasn't sure Oli would take it as a sign of weakness.

"Now, now, we can't bet it all on one horse," *Ciro* waved it off. "Don't discount just how batshit crazy *Borja* and *Felipe* can be. They've got something coming to them, too."

At last that was something they could all agree on, no matter who called dibs first.

Harri might have not had the best vision, but it was clear that they couldn't make a thorough investigation of possible hiding places right then. He was not about to explain to Quiet why they were all in his room without permission.

Granted, Quiet had never told them they needed permission to enter, but he preferred to not have that talk yet. He already would have to talk to the others about the notebook, he was certain he wouldn't get out of that one.

"*Tabi* wanted to talk to you once you got back to normal." Again with that. *Ciro* winced. "Good luck."

His beloved was gone.

There was much to worry about, but as always, she was at the forefront of *Felipe's* mind. It had been worrisome before, but he'd had hope she would return; this was, after all, her homestead. And what, to her, would he be if he left her residence without at least bidding her a proper and polite goodbye? He would stay and keep her place safe and warm for her, so that when she settled back in, she could feel his residual body heat like an embrace at her sides. He wanted to imprint himself on her home, in small ways, so as to signify his importance to her; a clean kitchen, an organized closet, a made bed.

The softest of blankets he'd folded over in intricate designs, and yet none could compare to the softness of her skin. Unblemished, radiant, perfect; her round, cute cheeks as a cloud in

his palm. Her small, dainty hands cupped over his to bring him closer. Such time they spent in such dreamlike, statuesque moments of intimacy! Softer yet was that doelike look in her eyes, sparkling like stars, his heart fluttered at just the memory...

And yet, even as he put the finishing touches on her living space, and turned to see her approaching form over the hill like the sun over the horizon... the dawn ducked back down, away from his hungry gaze.

His beloved had run from him.

She backed away from his approach. Her angelic voice had grown quieter, more distant, its heavenly melody shrinking back from his ears, her gorgeous visage shielded from his eyes. She'd backed into a corner, and he was disbarred from following her, from reaching in with open arms and pulling her out from the darkness of her thoughts.

His beloved was stolen away into the night.

Such anxieties instilled into her! His heart, it felt tight in his chest, watching her struggle for words; he *needed* to make it all better! He simply *must*!

And yet, again, she was taken. Not of her own will, surely. She spared him nary a glance nor a whisper. He longed for her touch, her glances, her smile; all things it felt as though it'd been ages since he'd last seen, but had seen so easily when she was free to stand with him.

His beloved was stolen away from him once more, the star-crossed lovers that they were. It seemed their romantic tale was not yet free of conflict. This hurdle would be their third act: a new and infinitely more complex barrier put between them, but one he would scale all the same. *For her*, he could do anything.

In the end, that was what convinced him.

The others simply did not understand concepts of love. They couldn't.

He could admit the Fury's passions were hot, boiling over and burning in their touch, but what love did not hurt? Was it not picturesque, for love to carve too deeply into one's self and leave their very heart and soul bared for the world to see? Was it not perfect, for love to leave no secret untold and no meaning undiscovered in the lives between one and another? Was it not poignant, what she'd said at the start, about "finding meaning together?" It hurt, but then it was over. It hurt, but then, couldn't they see? They'd been accepted. They'd feel no pain again, no conflict nor fear nor rejection, if only they accepted back and took her hand. The pain and hurt was over; then, right then, was the time for healing and reconciliation. They'd weathered the worst of the storm; *she* was their *reward*.

All of life's suffering could be endured, as long as one returns home to their loved one. That was a fact. *The* fact. The most factual statement of the universe, printed in bold in stardust. It was what he hatched in certainty of; all could be endured, *for her sake*.

But of course.

In hindsight, he had not fit with his fellow Voices at all. They couldn't see things from his point of view, didn't even try. All but one.

He was glad he had chosen to stay by his side.

Borja was in great need of a friend. Felipe saw the intent in the eyes of those he'd once considered friends. *Violence*. Bloodshed. Lethality. The barbarians had no subtlety in their traitorous schemes. What was spoken aloud was bad enough.

All the worse, when the lines were drawn in the sand. Felipe paid no mind to the disdain in Ciro's expression; he'd come to expect it of the cynic (though he knew his heart could be opened, if only he paid attention to the first of many stories they'd been told). He was concerned with his only true friend.

He'd never thought the word "wilt" could so accurately describe a change in disposition. Borja had been exceptionally brave throughout the night; and yet now, seeing Felipe rejected and discarded just the same as he'd been... he could see the bravado drain from him in waves like a dying bloom.

Felipe had never seen such *life* in Borja before. Felipe almost thought he saw him smile, once or twice; once or twice, watching Quiet watching Ava. The joy of being seen and heard, finally, after being ignored so long.

Until, in unnerving sync, the others turned as one to glare at him as if to punish him for being happy. With how depressed he became at their unprovoked ire, Felipe worried he might never see that spark alight again.

He'd hardly spoken, for most of the night. Indeed, not even the visage of his Princess, his Thelka, managed to lift much of his spirits; startling, considering how Felipe had seen his mood switch on a dime before from her mere passing glance. It was adorable. It was sincere in its devotion. It was something Felipe saw a bit of himself in. Its absence was all the greater a sign of something horribly wrong with him.

It was in a low murmur, in passing, just before Felipe made himself at home in his fair lady's place of rest, that Borja finally lifted his gaze from the floor enough to speak. And what a sad thing to say, he'd muttered, "you don't have to stick by me. In fact, you shouldn't."

How, in all the stars above and all their gracious designs, had a soul as kind as Borja's been cast aside like this?

"You *know* that's not true," Felipe had protested that very moment. But Borja was too broken to listen or hear, and had resigned himself to limping to bed alone that night.

That morning, Felipe decided he needed to intervene. He could not spend another moment allowing his friend to wallow in such misery; no one, ever, deserved to feel so alone. He would offer as much companionship as Borja needed, until he could stand as tall as his height permitted. *That* was what camaraderie was *for*.

There he was, exiting the bathroom. Wasn't that nostalgic? He'd lifted his spirits up in a similar situation once, he could do it again.

Felipe fell into step beside him, "I'm starting to think..."

"Congratulations, Pipo." There was the smile he was hoping for.

"You know what they... No, you didn't hear," Borja shook his head as if he could clear his thoughts that way. "I'd forgotten you can't hear them anymore. Does it... hurt?"

"No," he answered easily. It wasn't like Felipe had used the thread much. Nothing to miss. "Hear who, Quiet?"

"All of them."

That was... different. There was a question on the tip of his tongue. He was never one to keep things to himself, so out of his mouth it slid: "was it like before?"

"Worse."

"I must admit, I wasn't paying much attention to the others when we were all together," Felipe said. United in the common goal of pacifying their Princess's heart, they all surely were, but the details were lost on him. It appeared that unity had crumbled. "But I can imagine without a common heart to swear themselves to, and the malice they dared express to you in the voices I could hear..."

"It hurt," Borja agreed, nodding solemnly to himself as if enjoying an inside joke. "But most things tend to. It's because of me, of what I am."

"They hurt you?" And Felipe hadn't known, hadn't been aware? He had been right there!

"I'm sorry. It's indescribable, the weight of it all. The things they threatened were unspeakable... except towards me," he glanced up. His smile was separate from the rest of him, dull eyes so very far away. "It's everything I deserve, in the end; why did I bother thinking they'd understand?"

"Nobody defended you?" There were ten of them, surely there had to be someone!

"It was a game to them. To one-up each other in imaginary hypotheticals of how to hurt me worst. How to *kill* me. The more brutal, the more glorified, the better." Borja glanced down to the floor again. "I thought... Fernando had been quiet through the initial ramblings, but..."

He trailed off, for a moment. Felipe moved, to hold his hand or cup his face, but his head lifted on its own soon enough. It was with a practiced grace of tragedy Borja moved at times, Felipe noticed. Like he'd been going through the motions so long he'd turned it into dance.

"He was just biding his time. Coming up with the grand finale. You heard him," Borja grinned, a sad thing. "I'm a cast off piece; splintered wood, broken and discarded like scrap. I'm made to be hated, and I'm fulfilling my purpose."

“He didn’t say anything worth listening to.” It was a point of shame to Felipe that he had not said anything in his friend’s defense, but he could help dissipate those doubts curling around him.

“Quiet was starting to listen to me!” there was something else in his tone, now. Frustration? “Even after the others started their sick game, he was listening to me, and— I thought I could get him to listen again after Fernando let go, but...”

"He's just not as reasonable as he used to be, when we all first met," Felipe concluded for him. "His heart has closed-off. No matter the patience it's given, it won't open up. He's always been a tad deaf to the song of love, it's what I was there to help with, but now he won't hear it at all."

“Oh, he hears it alright. A different tune, is all.”

Felipe blinked. He hadn't seen it, that flicker of a redemptive spark Borja had, but he wouldn't give up on a friend if they were showing signs of improvement. “Truly?”

Borja sighed in lieu of a response, rubbing his face. "Anytime he's given a reason to let go, he just latches on harder... Both of them do."

That was not a sign of improvement. The exact opposite, knowing what was right to do and yet digging his heels in. Instead of drinking the scene in, as Felipe had done, he shied away from it. Seeking comfort in his second-in-command, again and again.

He couldn't listen if he kept letting Fernando cover his ears for him.

"You were right. I didn't want to believe it, but..."

"That's all I've ever wanted to hear."

The smile Borja gave Felipe settled like the warmth of the sun right beside the sinking feeling of a rock in his stomach. Hope and dread in equal amounts. For Felipe was certain Borja was the purest of them all, except of course his darling love and himself, and good would always triumph over evil; with Borja smiling at him like *that*, how could he not believe that? It was one of many wonders of the world that reaffirmed his optimism in the face of adversity. And, yet, still...

Something terrible was on the horizon. Dread settled further into his stomach, digesting, and suffused throughout his limbs; the need to act, to solve a problem, to vanquish a villain.

Felipe was never one to sit and stew on what troubled him.

In contrast, Borja still wanted to talk, it seemed. “Now you see what I told you? Things can’t get better with the way those two block each other's progress.”

When the Fernando on the screen let go, Quiet broke his stillness, rushing to him with a strange sort of desperation. It was a tragedy, to be sure, not even counting the fact Gonzalo had followed so quickly, unable to reciprocate his beloved's feelings. But that reaction had been only for one.

It was puzzling, to say the least.

Felipe knew, and had seen firsthand, how Quiet resisted change. He shied away, hid from it, did everything in his power to escape its grasp; he had felt the way, long ago, their shared body seemed to shrivel in response to Felipe's heart, as open as his mind. He had been there for Quiet's struggle against the other Princess's sharpness, had coached him through his struggles of courtship. His failures in the game of love were the fault of how he held himself back by his selfish notions of hurt and scar and score.

Fernando, in comparison... He did not run, did not flee, did not share Quiet's cowardice or inherent selfishness. But he, too, resisted change; had sworn himself off from the siren song of love, the one Felipe and his beloved had all but surrendered themselves to and were all the happier in doing so.

In a way, Felipe considered, Fernando was more closed off than even Quiet in that way; he did not flee, and so there was no pursuit, no chase, no game of playing hard to get.

But then again, who would pursue *him*?

What kind of progress could Fernando have? What drove him?

It was a sad epiphany. Fernando did not have anyone. He was uniquely alone; he existed only in relation to the relationships of others, with no one to call *his*. He had no happily ever after written for him, made for and destined to be with no one and nothing.

Forever doomed to be a half without a whole.

Why else would he cling to Quiet so tightly? It was the closest thing to completion he'd ever known.

And, with how he pulled him in tighter...

Felipe would be lying if he said he didn't breathe a sigh of relief. At last, something he could do. "Their troubled hearts have tangled together in their insecurities, indeed, but don't you fret. No knot is impossible to unweave."

Borja raised an eyebrow. "They're joined at the hip, how do you propose we do that?"

"Didn't you notice who it was that dragged the other into his embrace?" Felipe smiled, claspings Borja's shoulder. "It looks messy on the outside, but at the heart of things, the source of our troubles is as clear-cut as it's always been."

It was heartwrenching to see Fernando taken advantage of in such a way. But it was in-character of the Quiet he knew, wasn't it, to use him like that? *He just uses people. He just uses us.* His grip on Borja's shoulder tightened at the thought, almost shaking. *Why wait?*

"Once we've pushed that horrid monster aside and freed Nando of his influence, he'll surely see the light."

"No," Borja disagreed, shaking Felipe off of him. "Not aside. *Here*, bound to us both; where we can keep him chained and fettered until his impulses are tamed."

Felipe was struck by the proposition. The compassion, despite everything, despite *all* that had been done to him, which Borja expressed without a hint of doubt. Felipe knew he was not as compassionate as his friend, and so he asked, "You don't want him dead?"

Borja blinked at his question. "Quiet? I do not."

"But," Felipe said, lips twitching as he tried to find the right words. *It could not be more deserved*. "It's just—"

"I want him scared," Borja clarified. The room shifted slightly as Borja raised from his hunched posture into something driven, something dangerous. It was not often that Borja lost the fold to his spine, but here and now, Felipe was reminded of the fact that Borja was the tallest man he knew by far. The heights he reached were uncanny.

His voice was clear, directed with focused intent. "I want him to bear the consequences of his actions. I want to remind him of his humanity until it strangles him from the inside out."

Felipe nodded, enraptured and enchanted as if by magic or miracle. Strange sadness forgotten entirely, Borja opened up his truest self to him; he opened up, and *spoke*, with the wisdom of the ages Felipe always had faith he had:

"I want his nerves to sting and burn with it. I want his blood to boil beneath his skin. I want to brandish iron and watch the boon of all he's suffered bloom across it. I want it to coat him anew. I want to brush his gore-slicked hair from his face and see his delirium dance in the light of his eyes. I want that light to flicker out. I want to seize him by the throat. I want to baptize him in that red sea until the thrashing stills and the bubbles stop forming.

"I want, for him, to see his blood in carmine instead of gold and find the humility in the hue of his humanity." Borja leaned in, speaking softer and slower. There was compassion in his eyes. "There is a song of countless agonies, and I want him to finally allow me to take his hands in mine and sing that sacred hymn. I want to show him all the things he never had the right to have, and I want him to be relieved of the burden. I want that weight off his shoulders. I want him to relax. To stop struggling. There was no point in trying to escape what his deity chose to make him go through. There was never a point and never a say. There was never a choice. He *was* chosen."

"And what a *privilege*, to be chosen," Felipe finished for him.

"To be loved," Borja reframed, and Felipe got chills.

He took a shuddering breath. "Beautiful, my friend. I couldn't have found better words for it, myself."

Borja froze for a moment, before looking away with a sudden onset of bashfulness. "Thank you."

It was unusual that Felipe had to look *up* at him. Even after speaking into being those bloodstained words, his countenance remained the same. The precise description escaped him at the moment. Magnetic, perhaps.

“But nothing is ever that easy,” Borja started to lower his head again, and Felipe would be damned if he let him bend down like a reed once more. Not now, that he had seen how he could be, if he let himself.

"So you wish it, my friend," one of Feli's hands found Borja's own, a split-second flinch on the latter's before allowing it to be held, the other gently and reassuringly patting his shoulder, "and so I'll have it done. You can count on me."

Borja was silent, for a moment, before, “you ought to be careful.”

Felipe wanted to laugh. Quiet hid behind others for a *reason*, Felipe wouldn't be in danger from him. He knew what to do, if push came to shove.

Borja was frowning at him, severe in his expression. “As you said, there's ten of them.”

Felipe had found it hard to believe everyone had turned on them so utterly, but he had seen it with his own eyes and heard with his own ears. Quiet may have spun lies and made everyone else blind, but it was the others who also actively hindered whatever progress that started.

One only had to see certain events on the screen to realize that. “They saw your other self persevering when they could not, yet called it a falsehood. Even after you did your best to make their passage to the other side the kindest it could be.”

That stopped the inevitable descent of Borja's spine, righting itself with frustration. It was good to see him more animated. Sadness wasn't a good look on him. “I understand why Fernando would've been wrecked with jealousy, as my alternate self was the last Voice standing.”

Jealousy... that was something Felipe hadn't been aware of, in the beginning. Before the implications of everyone having their own body became clear. Before Cain had dangled that possibility in front of him and made him see black.

But that wasn't the angle Borja focused on. “But *Ciro*... I should have seen that coming.”

Felipe remembered it, yes. How *Ciro* had said he'd kill him. Felipe had been too shocked at his boldness to speak up. At the sheer audacity to admit it. “I'm surprised, after all he's seen, he would still choose to perpetuate a cycle of violence rather than indulge her desires.”

“Him and Quiet are alike in that way. Like mules. Even after my goddess tried to help them see, they shut themselves off. They couldn't listen to Her, even after She offered mercy, berated them for turning against *me*,” the beginnings of a smile gracing Borja's lips, faint and quick, before disappearing. “Quiet bowed to Her, the others didn't, and if they don't listen to Her, I—”

Felipe simply wouldn't let that happen. "He won't lay a hand on you if I have anything to say about it."

Borja leaned in slightly, like he was telling him a secret. "You did before."

Did he?

His surprise must have shown on his face, because Borja nodded. "You did. You must still have some sort of connection to the rest of us. To them. Faint and frayed, not enough to communicate much— you're stronger than me— but enough to give a strong impression. Through *real* language. *Real* communication."

The signals of his heart. His desires, freed from the threads of his soul and set loose upon the world. Natural, necessary, and beautiful. Unfettered. Pure.

"Violence," Borja breathed. "Overpowering, unrelenting *violence*."

That was not *quite* how he would put it.

"I felt it," Borja continued, and Felipe stalled. *How? But...* Borja put a hand up, a slight smile crossing his face. "I know it wasn't meant for me; I *knew* what violence *meant for me* felt like through the other's channels, and you would never. Still... the pure rage you channeled. It was powerful. It was beautiful. A pain easy to get lost in."

"Did you?"

"I can say, with absolute certainty, that *he* did. He shook with the force of it, overwhelmed, thrown off balance and scrambling for a center of gravity. He was afraid. Just like I wanted it to be."

That made Felipe feel good. He was capable after all. He did the right thing, even without meaning to, with the purest form of feeling at his disposal.

"With the right nudging, and enough treatment like that..." Borja leaned back, a contemplative look on his face, "...we can correct his center, to the right alignment. Put him on the right path, the straight and narrow, back to Her. Where he's meant to be."

"As long as you're not caught in the crossfire."

"I can handle the pain," Borja smiled. It looked hopeful. "That's the point."

What did Borja have left to learn, Felipe wondered? Such a wise and compassionate soul, and still he sought out more. He sought out pain like a vow, a promise; a need, an addiction; a religion. He worshiped the grounds of his own agony. He was hurt and he thanked the world for it, with nothing in return. How many burdens would he take on for the betterment of the world around him, for the sake of reducing the agony of others? It was beautiful, but it was tragic.

He had learned to embrace his chains. Could Felipe slip his wrists from these shackles, too? He'd endured enough. Felipe would see to it that he had a happy ending. There had to be a

way to make Quiet see the light without hurting him. Without hurting *Borja*.

Felipe had to make his voice sound firm. This was something he wouldn't back down from. "I don't want you to. Nor would my beloved, and I'm certain you don't want to make her unhappy. You do value her friendship so."

Borja tensed.

At just the mere thought of his darling's disapproval, no doubt! Felipe could hardly blame him; he couldn't even imagine it, so frightful the projected image would be. It may just still his heart on the spot. How her eyes would grow large and glossy at the sight of her friend so much as wearied on a poor day, her compassionate heart fit to burst; to rip asunder! Perish the thought, and may it stay dead. He would sooner end his own life than sully hers.

Gods above, he had to talk to her. *Soon*.

His hands ached with tension. Burning. He flexed them until it stopped, imagining her hands to hold and her angelic voice in his ears.

What was she doing now? What did her days look like, when he was not around to see them? He could hardly imagine his life without the promise of her return; it would be like imagining his days without the sun. Every moment spent without her was spent in mourning of her absence and anticipation of their reunion. And oh, how he mourned now.

How was she faring in the den of villains, even with an oh-so-protective sister to guard her? She could never be as vigilant as him. He knew the very pattern of her breaths, knew the slightest variations.

Was she thinking of him, now? Were they still connected, no matter their distance, by such a mutual longing? He hoped so. He liked to think she thought of him as he did her, a soft smile on her face and gentle, dreaming eyes. Dreaming of him. In the day. At night. Always.

The best dreams were the ones that came true. He would like to dream of her and wake up with her in his arms.

There was a tightness in his chest; the compaction of a fantasy. He sighed, deeply, exhaling the parts of her that made his mind go cloudy. Absence *did* make the heart grow fonder.

Borja was smiling, a brittle thing. "You do know me well, my friend. I wouldn't dare."

He was still staying upright, leaning backwards, even. As long as he didn't return to the slouch, Felipe considered it a job well done.

"But you can use more than just a *feeling* to attack him with next time."

Felipe blinked the reveries out of his eyes. He wasn't one to state the obvious, but, "you just said feelings are all I have."

"Not at all. Sharp claws, too, if the mood hits you right. And more. You just have to give into it; let it diffuse through you, permeate wherever it flows... you let it in so swiftly, initially.

It's on me for letting you hide it away."

Diffuse through him... that sounded like a pulse, like the beating of his heart. If he held his breath, in this moment, he could feel it; could feel it in his ears, throughout his head. Steady. Like a war drum.

"You know," Borja trailed on, "there's not too far a difference between love and hate."

But of course there was.

Hatred hurt people. Love could never do the same. Borja, of all people, should know this difference. If anything, they were opposites.

"Opposites attract," Borja said, as if reading Felipe's mind.

Not so, with his dearest. They were a perfect match in every sense. Perhaps Borja was drawing from his own experience... *his* lady had quite the impressive voice, at least. She was not afraid to assert herself. He hoped she was making a good impression of that on his friend.

"You and I may have our differences," Felipe conceded, because he would not cause undue conflict when resolution was afoot. "But we make a merry pair indeed. Tell me, truly, is there not something pertinent pulling at your heart's desire at this moment?"

Borja squinted, slowly shaking his head.

"I know there is something I simply *must* know. A fair maiden trapped in a dastardly scheme..." Borja shrank back, and Felipe captured his hand to pull him towards their mutual destination. "We have *got* to find out if Lucretia will be saved."

Borja started mumbling a silent prayer.

"Yes! What better note to end our conversation on than a mutual escapade into the worries of a fantastical people," Felipe cheered, searching for the remote to turn on the TV.

"It's a hopeless situation," Borja warned.

Felipe shook his head, patting his friend on the shoulder. "Only in the moment we chose to end it on, my friend. The stakes have never been higher, but fret not; love *always* prevails." And the light of the screen would show it. "Things will most certainly turn out alright in the end if we just keep watching."

Oleander was acting weird.

To Quiet, this often meant something illegal was happening under his nose, and he had to figure out what before they had the consequences of his activities knocking at their door. But *this* weird was different from Oli's *normal* weird. He almost seemed... preoccupied, with something.

“Are you aware you’re walking on your tiptoes?” Quiet tried not to smile. They did the same when they were nervous, pacing. Ave did the same. Even Gonchi that one time. He’d watched as Oli, pointedly, flattened his feet before his eyes, and shrugged it off *quite* nonconvincingly. And that was just yesterday.

Rushing in front of Quiet to enter a room before he did, breathing a sigh of relief, and saying to absolutely no one, “all clear.” Multiple times! In multiple rooms! Quiet *searched* those rooms. They couldn’t find anything he could’ve been hiding—but, well, it was pretty obvious there was *something*.

“You wouldn’t have happened to have noticed anything *odd* in the last ... oh, I don’t know, 72 hours have you? Nothing? Nothing at all? Yeah, me neither! Just checking.”

Who measured days by hours, really?

“Hey, you haven’t noticed any weird charges coming in, have you? ... Our finances look *very* typical, don’t worry about it!”

Okay, that one was actually pretty normal for him. Quiet knew, by now, that numbers weren’t his thing, so he wasn’t sure what charges he was supposed to be seeing. ... In hindsight, maybe he should’ve reconsidered letting Oli handle finances. Or money in general.

Still, it had been building up for a *while* now; usually if Quiet didn’t catch a scheme by now, it’d already been completed—to oftentimes disastrous results.

He had not forgotten the one time when he’d heard a commotion and found Ave and Oli *tearing* into each other. Oli’s one defense, strangely for him, had been he had just been ‘playing’ and Ave ‘did not have to react like that.’ At least that was *before* Ave started biting...

The fact that Oli had been pulling these strings *long-term* (well, long-term for Oli, anyway) was making Quiet sweat. Did he rob a bank? With whose help?

“What, me? Don’t sweat it, boss, it’s nothing *you* have to worry about.”

Right. That settled it. Oli didn’t call Quiet ‘boss’ unless he wanted something. “Why, Oli, I thought you were supposed to be the best liar out of all of us.”

Oli straightened to his full height, and Quiet wondered if he had accidentally touched a nerve. There was definitely something offended in his gaze.

“I didn’t mean it,” Quiet corrected at once. A beat. Quiet put his hands up for good measure. “I take it all back. You’re *so* good at lying. I have no clue anything’s going on.”

Oli smiled. Something was wrong with his teeth. Did... did he need braces?... Did Quiet have to pull Harri in on this?

“Well, you might find out soon enough!” Connie interjected, popping in from who-knows-where, Dami— *Dami*? Those two were friends? What?— excitedly skipping in with him. *What?*

He knew Oli could be a lot more subtle if he really wanted to — his growth in that area had been as swift as it was concerning — so whatever was happening, it was beyond his scope. And, considering Connie's words, beyond Quiet's help, too.

Oh god.

Oleander and Connie in the same scheme.

What did they *do*? How did they rope *Dami* into this? Was something about to explode?! He hoped it was not the water heater again. That had been the fault of nobody, but still. What a miserable time that was.

He glanced around, just a bit afraid for his life, and caught eyes with someone peeking around the corner. He ducked away too slow to go wholly undetected. *Wh—?*

(Bewilderment) You're in on this, too?

(Lie) ...No...?

Nando peeked back around the corner. Oli was glaring at him something fierce. Quiet could see Nando struggling to keep a straight face. They made eye contact with him, a sudden grin breaking out—and away he looked, so fast he risked giving himself whiplash, stifling the expression.

God. Oli really was the best liar of them all, by sheer process of elimination. Quiet was smiling too, a little, he realized. Nando looked like he wasn't sure if he should go back into hiding or not now that he'd been caught.

(Reassurance) Pretend I didn't see anything, it's okay.

That smile was too genuine to fake. Away he went. Who went? Quiet saw nothing.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to show you something special," Dami started, glancing briefly at Oli before nodding to herself. "Something a lot of us have been working super hard on, and something, um— I think, I hope, you'll really appreciate!"

"It was *so expensive*," Oli murmured beside him. Real funny from the guy Quiet caught printing money. ...Wait.

Oh, *no*.

(Apprehension) Please don't tell me.

From one channel, an eruptive glee.

(Levity) We sure did!

From the other, a controlled mask.

(Innocence) Tell you what?

(How did he project that so well when Quiet *knew* he was lying?!)

(Frustration) *You two aren't coordinated at all!*

(Levity) *And what makes you think we're trying to be?*

(Confidence) *I think we are. You just don't know the angle yet.*

"You didn't have to spend *money* on me," Quiet insisted, waving his hands in front of his face. His wings were starting to curl in. "I'm fine."

Dami stalled, expression twisting into nervous apprehension. "Um... i-it's not about the money, really..."

"Yeah," Connie laughed, "it's not like the numbers on Oli's spreadsheet are *real*."

Slowly, Oli turned his head to him. And held the glare. Connie, in turn, was looking anywhere but at him. Dami coughed to catch everyone's attention again. Which worked, really, because Quiet realized these two could've never been working *together* on this of their own volition.

...Dami organized something. *Dami* put something together. And to think he'd been pleasantly surprised at her initiative to ask him a question a few days earlier. Clearly, she was leaps and bounds ahead from what he expected.

"What do you want to show me?" He decided to play along.

Dami glanced to Quiet's left, at Connie. And then she clapped her hands together and smiled wide. "I'm glad you asked! Come on," she held her hand out, and as if by instinct, Quiet took her hand in his. She pulled him along, and he followed. *Up the stairs, out the door, out into the woods*— to a familiar door.

Aw. "You put my name on it."

Dami smiled, soft and sweet and genuine. She spoke, her voice tinged with something excited, something that made it warble. "Yeah. That's Fernando's."

The response from one of his threads was immediate.

(Hope) (Anticipation) *Do you like it?*

(Gratitude) *I love it.*

He meant it.

"And..."

She moved her hand to the doorknob. She turned it, and it *clicked*. His door didn't *click* like that. They got him a whole new door? And he hadn't noticed?

“That’s Winnie’s.”

She took a breath as the pattern unfurled before him. *Wait. Wait.* A second was all she gave them both before she pushed it open and stepped through. One confident step in, and a gentle smile pulling him right in with her. “...This is everyone else.”

He followed her in. And.

Oh. Oh he couldn’t breathe. His throat and heart were too tight for it.

His room was unrecognizable. There was *so much*.

The walls were repainted blue. The walls were covered. The walls were illuminated by a collection of decorative lights and lamps. The flooring had changed—was reinstalled, renewed. Old wooden panels replaced where they’d been chipped or worn or stuck up from the rest. Not even mentioning the *furnishings*...

A floating, round shelving unit occupied a wall; in it, the first storage space from the bottom, was a first aid kit. Easiest place to reach for, if it was needed. Most accessible spot in the room. And a hammock, beside it, stuck into its own localized corner, soft panel mats stuck beneath it in case of a moment of clumsiness to prevent a rough fall. And, in case a grounded seating area be preferred to the suspended laying one, a bean bag placed below. A reader’s setup with specific conditions and contingencies. Quiet could see Dami’s eyes tracking where his own looked, but before she could even take the breath to guess, he was already murmuring beneath his own. “Harrier...”

One of many threads which made Quiet who he was hummed in faint recognition. It felt like a guitar pick on his heartstrings.

(Curiosity) All good?

(Gratitude) Golden.

(Amusement) (Exasperation) Don’t pun at me at a time like this.

If Quiet’s throat were not closing up on him, he might’ve laughed a little harder.

The first aid kit was obvious. “Paco...”

*(Satisfaction) There’s more packed in the closet. Only one needs to be out at a time, though.
That’s what the **others** say...*

Beside the reading area, closer to the door where Quiet lingered at the entrance from, was a desk and chair. A wide desk, with plenty of surface area. L-shaped and oriented to cut off others from coming in out of nowhere and hovering over their shoulder to peer at what they’re working on.

He had a feeling... “Tabi.”

Dami smiled in turn. “You got it.”

He didn't say Ave's name. He had to catch his breath first. He didn't need to. He already understood. The message was sent several mornings ago. How many mornings ago?

*(Conspiracy) Hey! Psst! There's something **above** for you, too!*

(Daze) The ceiling...?

He didn't want to look up there.

(Pause) ...

Oops, wrong thing to say. Every blind guess couldn't be a winner.

Hey, at least Quiet found a crack in the facade. It grew once acknowledged, splintered all on its own. Like his father.

(Introduction) Hey, boss.

(Manipulation) Step into my parlor a moment.

There, over his shoulders, over his back. There were his strings.

Round and round it went, revolving and revolving around him; tricks behind his back, stage lights over the horizon. He felt the trembling in his hands bind and stop, appearance kept and sight sharpened. He was on the stage. He had to perform. Round and round the record went. And his next line was...?

(Cover) (Reassurance) You're almost done.

(Hint) Don't worry. You'll find out if you sleep on it.

That was the last thing he wanted. Obediently, he tried to rise. His legs did not want to work. His body trembled, but did not move.

(Cover) (Encouragement) Go on.

(Shame) Help...?

...

...

Up and at 'em, boss. [Face the music.]

He expected to be called 'pathetic.' But instead he was just standing. He thought he tasted *(consternation)* in his throat.

(Explore) The night table...?

(Approval) Getting warmer!

There was nothing on the night table. The things he left behind were put away for him.

(Explore) 'Sleep on...' the pillow?

It looked like a normal pillow, all things considered. Part of the bedspread; the *new* bedspread, clean sheets and all. No blood on these ones yet.

What?

He grabbed the pillow and flipped it over. Oh. "Oli..." He was already listening, but his thread hummed in recognition nevertheless. He smiled a little. What else would it be?

(Satisfaction) Found it!

A knife, familiar to him in the way it and many of its kind was present at mealtimes. Wooden handle, a serrated edge. Comforting in its differences. For—

(Insistence) Protection.

Well, obviously. His arm jerked without his approval, keeping the blade at arm's length from him and setting it aside. The thread binding around the offending arm froze and went slack in an instant, something like *(horror)* staying its control.

Oli had once been his Opportunist. It was impressive how unguarded he was being.

(Surprise) (Reassurance) It's fine. Like I told you.

(Horror) (Backtrack) I didn't want to control you like that.

(Confusion) Why?

(Backtrack) *Decisions are really **your** thing, you know. You're the best at 'em! **The** guy to call whenever a tough decision's gotta be made. No need to step on your toes.*

A distant part of him was overflowing with pride. The rest of him...

...focused on something else, as Oli disengaged. A lamp that gave a very small amount of light. Multicolored blobs rose and fell inside it, separating and rejoining. What was the name...?

"Connie...?"

(Levity) Hey, you remembered! Well, not all the way. That's a lava lamp. Super edible-looking, right?

(Confusion) ...No?

(Amusement) Really? I thought you'd change your tune seeing it in-person.

Mostly, he was wondering how it worked. What was inside it, how did it float. Then his eyes strayed to the thing beside it.

A plushie, to be sure, but of what, he had no idea. It had a white, blocky head with two curved horns, black eyes, black arms and a blue cloak. Oh. And a little... not pristine, but cracked blade strapped to its back. He reached forward, holding it, curiously inspecting the item. Its little blade was magnetic and detachable. He pretended to let it take a few swings.

Cute... *Who* got this for him?

And there it was, the secondhand (*Apprehension*). “Ciro...”

(Defensiveness) It’s a reference, you wouldn’t get it.

(Offering) I could show you what they’re from, though, if you like them.

He’d like that, maybe. He put the plushie back where it had been, then turned back. Looked around.

Dami and him weren’t the only ones there, anymore. He didn’t know when the others had come in. They must have been watching; or they must have been expecting something to watch, now. There was a static in his ears.

Quiet saw the room— *his* room— and wondered what was wrong with him.

Why couldn't he appreciate what everyone did in its entirety? They had taken the time to think things through, ponder what he could like, add to the vision. All with the simple goal to make him more comfortable.

A gift. A gift for him, the first one in his life. He had always given gifts to Her, he never...

He had to make his vocal chords work, thank them, sleep there at least once. That was what was expected, what he had to do. And yet he felt his heart stutter and his hands shake.

...He was grateful, glad, and it was terrifying. He'd never been able to keep anything that mattered. Even the woods were taken away from him. Nothing stayed, nothing lasted, and it all would change and change and change until it couldn’t recognize itself anymore.

He...

...

He couldn’t wait forever. There was no waiting forever.

He took a deep breath. He steeled his nerves. He emptied his mind.

And he said it.

“I’m ready to go back.”

Braced for impact.

“Wait, what?” Nando asked, the noise filtered through something Quiet couldn't see. Like staring at him through a pane of glass. “No, come on, don't be worrying about that now. You can spend at least one night here.”

Quiet wasn't sure what his wings did, but there was a tension at his back; pulling— no, dragging him up, hitching like his breath, uneven.

Please don't make me. Please don't. Please.

“You know that's what you always said before she snapped your soul like a twig, right?” Tabi remarked, an eyebrow raised.

“Tabitha Fuentes!” Dami gasped, loud in the sudden silence, reverberating in the suddenly crowded room. Crowded with people. Crowded with *things*.

Dami punched Tabi on the arm and she actually seemed to flinch. Quiet was just unfocused enough to catch Gonchi stifle a smile at the exchange.

Dami approached— correction, took a single step forward, stopping once she caught Quiet's attention. It was a slippery thing to grasp. Especially for him. “You've been very brave, going back and all, but you don't have to be brave all the time.”

“It's almost over,” he said, begged for her to understand. “It will be *over*.”

He just wanted it to be over. He couldn't do this anymore. She felt the same, once, didn't she?

“It's better if you consult it with the pillow,” Harri said from somewhere behind— oh, he could see his glasses peeking from behind Gonchi. “Preferrably one without knives under it.”

Oli slunk to the front of the group to glare at him. Was it his imagination, or had Harri gone rigid?

“I don't know what all of you will do, but *I* am getting my mattress.” That was Connie's voice, already going for the door.

Oli perked up at once. It was very strange to see both of them on the same page. “We do deserve a celebration for doing all this undetected.”

That cloud of dark hair was Grace, going between Ava and Gonchi with a scowl. “You two are sleeping *separately*.”

“Of course, why wouldn't we?”

She did not see it fit to dignify that with a response, evidently, circling around and around Quiet as she did. Something about it was immensely comforting. Maybe it was the way she'd changed, but remained the same. Maybe it was the look in her eye as she spun around him, like she was happy, like she had something to tell him, something he felt he wanted to hear. Maybe it was just the chill.

(Anticipation) Something to say?

(Humor) I'll tell you in the morning.

(Sincerity) For now I'm just happy to spend the night with you.

Faintly, he heard Dami say something about how she was going to make drinks, she would be back in a flash. Footsteps going out. The dragging of something heavy.

They were staying with him. At least for tonight. He wasn't going to be alone. The world started coming back into focus.

Someone was leading him, back to... to... *it*, the— he sat down and it spread outwards. Ah, the beanbag. He blinked, eyes refocusing. He was, indeed, sitting there. And who else but Nando by his side?

“Back with me?”

Oh. He'd worried him again. He nodded.

“I wasn't sure about a bed with your anatomy,” Harri clarified as Quiet looked up at the hammock. “Fer said it would be fine, but I figured more options for you would be better than less.”

“He's saying he thinks too much,” Gonchi simplified.

Quiet flexed his wings at his back. That was... considerate. He preferred to sleep on his side, anyway.

“There was a loose floorboard by the bed. Don't worry, we fixed it.” Harri spoke with a certain *tone*. Like he was saying something he wasn't saying. Like he expected Quiet to hear it. Like the answer was staring him in the face to a question he hadn't even thought to ask yet.

He remembered at once— *how could he have forgotten?! —*and, to his credit, just waited for the other shoe to drop. No overreaction this time. Externally. There was little to no chance of *that* getting missed.

He hadn't even finished it. Was that better or worse? “...Did you find what you were looking for?”

“More than I asked for.” Harri sighed.

Dami came back soon enough, arms heavy with— someone should help her. One tray on each arm was fine, but the one she was trying to balance on her shoulder was balancing precariously.

Thankfully, Oli relieved her of that burden before any sort of disaster could happen. With the myriad of mattresses and pillows all around, it was bound to happen sooner rather than later.

Oli reached to take one mug in particular, and Quiet watched with some bemused anticipation as she shook her head and made a beeline straight towards him.

“Here,” she said, and he took it. “Special, for you.”

He held it up, not quite taking a sip yet. It smelt strongly of cinnamon. Maybe a little too much, not that he’d tell her that. “Thank you.”

Dami smiled at him, moving to go to the rest.

“Wait.”

She did, turning back to look at him, a slight worried crease to her eyebrows.

“Really. *Really*. Thank you.”

“...You’re welcome,” Dami obliged.

“You know, even if it’s not red...” Quiet smiled. “I still think it tastes nice.”

Dami hummed. “Not all red things are bad, and not all *not-red* things taste bad.”

“That’s a fair compromise,” Quiet told her. And off she went, his gaze trailing through the spaces she walked.

“I thought there was a spice that turned food red?” Connie raised his voice to ask.

It was Paco who answered him. “You are *not* putting paprika on chocolate, what is wrong with you?!”

“I don’t knowww... sounds exotic!”

“It was missing one thing, though,” Harri brought Quiet’s attention back to himself. He liked just being a part of the room instead. Or at least he preferred spacing out like that to *this*.

“Details, I know,” Quiet sighed. “Created more questions than answers.”

Harri put down his mug. “That’s just about the dumbest thing I’ve heard in my life.”

Ah. Well. Quiet didn’t want to... look at him.

“Listen,” Harri called, and Quiet forced himself to look. He didn’t look *too* mad. Maybe he’d get away with it. “It was missing *corrections*. You *don’t* deserve it.”

...Oh, Quiet heard that one. That was easy to get. *Shockingly* direct. He was expecting a riddle.

“None of it,” Harri clarified further. “We all care about you. We *don’t* want to see you get hurt. That’s... what we’re all here for.”

Quiet stared into his mug. Full. Nearly filled to the brim, if he hadn’t already taken his first sips of it. Sweet and warm and shared between each and every one of them. Something done for them, just for them; and something shared with the people they... lived with.

That was alright. That would do. They could accept that, stay here for a while, with...

A pause. Recounting. "Where's... where's Cain, in all this?"

Dami nearly tripped. It was a good thing Ave's reflexes were so sharp.

"Oh. Hah," Connie laughed slightly under his breath, and then laughed a little more forcefully. A little more genuinely. Like he just remembered he could. "We totally forgot to tell him, didn't we?"

"*Forgot?* I thought that was intentional," Oli said.

Quiet couldn't tell them to 'be nice' if the other party wouldn't, either.

Coagulated disappointment sat heavy in his gut, either way. He should have tempered his expectations better, even the ones he didn't realize he had until that moment. Cain *had* said being nothing felt 'right,' once upon a never, after all. It made sense he would put the same amount of effort in for Quiet.

But Connie was actually laughing again. Ave was more relaxed than Quiet had usually seen him. Maybe it was okay, to exist with just *most* of his people, like this. Maybe Cain would... come by, sometime, too. But maybe it was okay to accept things as they were now, without worrying about any future possibilities.

He took another sip of his mug, contemplating, drinking it all in. For all this moment was worth.

Chapter End Notes

SPANISH PHRASES

Mancha, te toca: Tag, you're it.

No puede decir tantas boludeces en un segundo, tiene un don: He can't say so much bullshit in one second, he has a gift.

overthink_it: does it count as a special Christmas chapter if the plot kinda sorta revolves around the characters putting a gift together as a surprise?... or is this just some fortunate and convenient timing, from the chapter update schedule?

dua: you know what, buddy, I wanna say it does count. happy early christmas!

Chapter 21: Otro rubio tarado

Chapter Summary

A page turns. A story needs a title. A plot needs a conflict. A game needs a reaction. They are ready to go back. The end is prewritten, and the ink has yet to dry.

Chapter Notes

Was told the names were confusing if they were at the end so here they are, at the beginning!

Broken - Borja
Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi
Cold - Caín
Contrarian - Connie
Hunted - Avellano/Ave
Opportunist - Oleander/Oli
Paranoid - Paco
Cheated - Ciro
Hero - Fernando/Nando
Smitten - Felipe
Skeptic - Harrier/Harri
Prisoner - Tabi/Tabitha
Damsel - Dami/Damiana
Witch - Winnie
Tower - Thelka
Adversary - Ava
Nightmare - Clara
Spectre - 'Grace'
Stranger - Plethora

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

There were several things holding them in place.

Wrapped around wrist, ankle, pulling down; they weighed at the borders of their heart, melancholic and contemplative and hesitant. It was for some time, then, that they lingered without thinking; without wanting to think, with want to relish in the inherent peace and safety afforded by their closed eyes. Not quite ready, not quite yet. Just another few moments

or lifetimes until the searing light burned into these hollow eyes that weren't quite their own again.

There was an absent-minded shifting in the space around them, not far enough to breach any boundaries or crack any glass. They curled around it protectively, expansive, safe from the world.

They were holding several things in place.

They were all right where they needed to be, at the present moment. Wings wrapped around threads wrapped around hearts. With their eyes closed and senses extended the way they were, now, they didn't quite need to see the shape; they could feel, in the undulations of each of their quiet, calm breaths, the contour of the space they inhabited. This space made of them, and them made of it.

They crossed over each other, in so many ways. Three threads ran so close they nearly bound into a solid rope, strengthened and holding each other together by their bonds. Of those three, one weaved around two others, with varying results; one bound itself to it with great aggression, and the other ran itself into knots trying to wriggle away.

Two threads, distant and frayed, broken and ripped away. Two threads, close and nostalgic, aged and new. One thread, separated from the rest, still circled around to contain the rest in its perimeter as it bound and held. All. Kept captive by and captivated by.

They stirred. The threads responded to the movement, following the patterns of their spiral, curling in around them. Their wings shifted minutely, pressing in around the room in turn, as they blinked the last of their sleep from their eyes, trying to take in the quiet without breaking the silence.

Their face brushed past a thread crossing over their eyes and resting comfortably on their head. Something tickled at their sides and stomach, wrapped around them just as it wrapped around the others, circles in circles, the unstated intent to keep everyone close despite everything.

There were several things holding them in place. More than just the threads, humming idiosyncratic harmonies between each other in dreams and memories, Quiet was bound in the rest of arms. It didn't surprise them, nor did it catch them off-guard.

As Quiet leaned down and into the hold, tucking their head under a chin, they realized they hadn't fallen asleep in their own bed. They were tucked away into their own little corner, surrounded by the others, their wings expanding out from their shoulder blades and following along the walls to snag everyone succinct and safe under their wings. They could feel where the others' weights were distributed, laying and leaning onto them. Yet more things which held them in place.

It didn't hurt. They felt calmer by the second. Heavy and sleep-warm. Maybe it was okay, just this once, to linger. To wait. Hours meant nothing in the maw of forever.

Their mind drifted. As did their eyes. Searching for where the lost two had gone off to, attention pulled unilaterally to one direction. A force like gravity pulling them out of the moment. A question.

(Hesitance) Are you coming home?

It trailed through them, empty. There was no reply.

The silence changed its tone.

A pressure. External, pressing in and intruding on; the pushing of a surface against their wings. They inhaled lowly, exhaling in a light breeze as the pressure paused minutely. It considered itself. Then, again, more forcefully this time; force intended to push past an obstacle, door pushed to swing out.

For a moment, they considered pushing back. A rejection...

So as to not be crumpled, their wings turned inwards at their attention, moment forgotten as easily as it came. The door to their bedroom swung in, no longer blocked by wings expanding past euclidean dimensions. Cold eyes stared from the shadows of a hallway unlit, regarding the scene without expression.

Those lidded eyes squeezed in a slight squint, gaze locking with theirs. A feeling like...

(Disappointment)

...wordless. Quiet's wings folded, just a bit. They felt like they'd been walked in on, almost. Caught. As silly and childish as *that* sounded.

Cain brushed past the door, stepping over the rest of the flock. He walked idly, feet light on the wooden flooring and steps muffled by soft carpeting. He climbed up and planted himself onto Quiet's bed in the center of the room. The bed creaked as he sat; the first weight it'd ever bore in its short existence. His legs dangled over the edge, briefly kicking the air and surrendering to the inertia of their momentum. He glanced down at Quiet. Down on the floor with the rest of their flock. His gaze lifted then, left them disregarded, as he took in the new additions around their room.

Something curdled in his stomach. Something sharp and barbed near his heart. The warmth of the room was changing into something else, their face warm, the air chilled; unidentifiable changes. Hands ached to fidget to dissipate their nervous energy, but they willed the world to stay still.

Silent in a different way. Not wanting to attract attention, embarrassed, ashamed of their weak position, scared to disappoint him further; they weren't sure which it was.

They did not move. *(Waiting for something to happen?)*

Someone else did first. A thread moved, first idle then sharp. Pulling at others. The room around them came alive, independent of them, as the more sensitive woke up first and the movement alerted the heavier sleepers. Ambient shuffling.

The added benefit of the arms around him curling in, irritated by the sound. If the circumstances were different, they might have just appreciated the warmth. Regrettably, Quiet pulled away for the time being; though, the way Nando tried to follow him forward didn't go entirely unnoticed. Nando woke up to the sudden distance.

Just as he glanced over to see Harri to the pair's left, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and grabbing blindly for his glasses, there was a sharp *thunk* of something stabbing its way through a hard surface. Quiet flinched to see Cain glancing over his shoulder at a knife embedded into the wall, still wobbling from the force with which it was thrown. "Hm."

To his left, Tabi grasping at Harri and yanking him back down. A light scuffle.

Across the room, Connie, his arm still extended. And Oleander next to him, glancing between Cain and the knife in the wall, and patting the pillow beneath his head as if searching for something.

(...Quiet wondered if his and Oli's were a matching set.)

Nando pulled at Quiet's arm. They leaned in, naturally.

Cain plucked the blade from the wall, holding the metal between his fingers, and gingerly leaned forward to extend it, handle-first, back to Connie. Oli stared at it, or at the exchange, as if he'd never seen anything like it in his life.

"You missed," Cain explained, gesturing as he held the blade out further.

(They looked like a matching set.)

Haltingly, Connie took it back, a slight tremble in his hands. For a moment, Quiet wondered if he would try again. He flipped the grip. Stared down at it. He opened his mouth to speak—

"And you fucked up the *wall!*" Ava complained, rising like a devil from the depths of hell. There went the peace and quiet.

Cain glanced at it behind him. There was an undeniable gash where the blade went through. He brushed the surface with his hand, smoothing over the cracks in the paint. "Oh, he didn't do anything that will last."

"That's for me to decide. Get out before something gets broken."

Cain hummed quietly, still examining the wall, prying his fingers into the hole. "It's not deep. Just paint over it."

Ava fumed, her voice filling the room with the beginning of the tirade on the tedium of home renovations and repair and the cost of such-and-such and the thought put into this-and-that. She was a lot more talkative than he remembered. That was probably a good thing.

"How'd he even get *in?*" Paco stage-whispered. His voice sounded faint. "Did he just walk in while the rest of us were sleeping? Did he just sit there watching us?"

“Only for a second,” Quiet defended, half-afraid of another bout of (*disappointment*), if not from him, then from someone else.

“You’re usually in the kitchen by this time,” Cain commented.

“What time is it— oh no,” Paco jumped to stand like a spring, gone in a flurry of movement. He always was primed to flee at a moment’s notice.

Cain’s feet planted back onto the ground with a light *thump*. He trailed along right out the door, leaving it open behind him.

“You’ve got another thing coming if you think you can just walk out!” Ava lectured, following hot on his heels. Not the kind of anger Quiet had seen, when she was changing for the worse; this was constructive, not destructive. Several more walked out the door, either invested in how Ava might escalate or what Paco would start cooking.

Winnie slunk behind them, pushing the door shut, listening to the latch *click*.

She scoffed, turning her back to the entrance, away from those who remained in the room. “Why’d I even get a lock if we weren’t going to use it?”

Oli finally lifted his head up, semi-frantically fixing his hair.

“We did use it! Who was the last one to enter? Give me that.” Oli stopped his questioning to snatch the weapon in Connie’s hands. “Get your own next time.”

(No matching set, then, just agile hands.)

“How did you know he had that?” Nando asked. Quiet wondered if he realized, with the way he’d started leaning forward, that he was looking to reassert their original position with their head as his chinrest. They decided not to point it out to him. “You sure got close enough to see it.”

“It’s *Oli*,” Connie started as an explanation.

“Ajá. And...?” Nando leaned in further, his head tilting in some kind of interest, brushing against them. Quiet decided not to intervene in this interaction.

“And it was right there.”

Quiet was sure the smile breaking out on their face had everything to do with the way Connie was fumbling this explanation, and nothing to do with how they’d gone full-headrest mode. Or the spot of glee in Nando’s voice. “And what were *you* doing so close to him?”

“Uh...”

“We’re partners,” Oli interrupted, “business partners. Dami’s cutting us a check of the profits for this project for helping her out.”

(Amusement) That explanation made more sense before he elaborated.

Amusement not his own; a slight feedback loop between them. The most literal form of an inside joke. “Sure.”

“And that partnership includes pillow-sharing?”

“I asked Dami—” Connie started.

“Yep,” Oli lied. “And apparently, to this one, shared custody of knives.”

“—but Tabitha said no for her,” and finished.

They weren’t on the same chapter, nevermind on the same page. Quiet stifled a laugh. “You two *really* aren’t coordinated at all.”

“Just give us some time,” Oli dismissed, switching his grip on the blade in his hands and sending it in a little trick spin. Connie smiled.

And wasn’t *that* ominous?

Gonchi rose, Ave following behind him. Nando leaned back to let Quiet up (a pity), the morning suddenly set to start. Ave murmured something, and Gonchi stepped up to Quiet. “Come on. Breakfast time for you.”

Quiet blinked, glancing around their room, looking for an excuse. “I’m not hungry.”

Normally this was true. Ave and Gonchi were early risers, and exercised in the morning at that, and so they got hungrier earlier than Quiet did.

But everyone was waking up at *Quiet’s* time, today.

He truly, honestly didn’t feel hungry. If anything, he felt a little sick to the stomach, pained almost, which was the opposite of hunger, he was pretty sure.

“You are starving,” Ave corrected. That didn’t sound right. Quiet knew that one.

“Either I lift you up and carry you there or you make the trip yourself,” Gonchi said. “Your choice.”

“I’d take him at his word with that one,” Nando teased behind them. *Betrayed by their best defense...* “You aren’t especially hard to carry around.”

“And I’ve done it before,” Gonchi added, thankfully letting *that* comment slip right on by.

“To shrink on your chores.”

“No.” Gonchi fiddled with his thread in an almost offended pattern. “You ended up doing it pretty well, though.”

“Doing what pretty well?” Winnie asked.

“Cleaning the upper side of the kitchen cabinets. He came back down grey.”

The layer of dust had been so thick it had been practically fur, and there had been several spiders that had not been too happy about them intruding. Not even getting into the fact they couldn't get back down safely by themselves, and that amounted to not the greatest time. They still weren't sure if being put up there or having to beg to be let down was worse.

Quiet bristled in mock offense. "I'm not a featherduster."

"You look a lot more like one now." Gonchi grinned as his eyes darted to their wings on either side, feathers puffed with their posture, trying their hardest to make him look bigger.

"Paco was ready to murder you when he saw how much dust I dropped down the kitchen. You're welcome, by the way."

"Adorable." Gonchi laughed in such a way Quiet wasn't sure if he referred to Paco or to Quiet's own intimidation attempt.

In the end, they went on their own volition.

There were several more things holding them in place.

Each moment they lingered, there appeared to be just one thing more. Breakfast turned to a grocery list — because they'd been running too low too long, and now was the best time for anything to be done. That turned to house hosting duties, to chores and to cleanliness, and the aftermath of the mess the others had made in their room. It truly wasn't anything; it could've waited, in Quiet's opinion. The others wouldn't hear it. It was *their* space, a particular silver-tongue claimed, and since they'd done so well hosting all the rest of them, it was just common courtesy for everyone else to clean up after themselves and keep that space comfortable.

"Heel, tip, heel, tip," he called out to Oli the moment they caught him tiptoe-walking again. Just like before, he flattened his steps. Nervous.

It was humbling, that realization. Quiet really wasn't good at names, even ones made without thought and by instinct. How could he have possibly thought 'opportunist' was the only thing to define that Voice? Oli had outgrown that name at a speed that made him dizzy, there was no doubt about it, because—

(Recognition) You're worried.

For them. For *them*.

But they were still their Decider, and had made a choice. No matter how long it took to complete—

(Reminder) Speaking of names...

Out from a fog, from a space beyond their vision, drifted the misty afterimage of the one person who'd forgiven Quiet for killing her. Their ever-present proof that they were worthy of being redeemed. The soul to save their own.

Right. That there was one thing he couldn't refuse. She had told him beforehand she had something to tell them. He gave her all his attention, for all the moment was worth.

She floated from his left, around to his right; fingers danced at first on his shoulder, then deviated from the patterns they'd grown used to, interlacing her fingers with his own. He shivered at the change in routine and watched with briefly stunned eyes as she rose their joined hands together, and pressed a swift kiss to their palm before twirling to complete her ritual circle. A cold shock ran down his arm from the point of contact, a pleasant chill in his veins, thrumming on time with his heartbeat.

It was cold and brief and passing with the second it lasted. A blink in the morning light. A snowflake melted onto his hand. It lingered past his recollection.

And she laughed, just enough, to recatch their attention as she spun back into frame.

He didn't speak. Let her talk. Let her whisper her thoughts into his soul, let her capture his heart in its lost and forgotten places and reflect something of her own.

(Confession) ...I was thinking of changing mine.

(Confusion) I thought you had already done that.

(Mischief) Who said I can't do it again?

She had a point there. Names... were a bit arbitrary. Even if they liked theirs. They nodded along.

"Killer," she said, her verbal voice overlapping with the humming of her soul. She harmonized with a chorus of one.

And they saw an opportunity. "Sure, you can take that one."

She laughed, leaning into them. They could play, too, if she invited it. They might've even been smiling. The lightness of her laugh was a slight and subtle thing. It lingered within them even as she calmed herself to speak, kept something in them free of tension like it'd been awaiting the sound to cue it was free to release it.

"When first asked, all I could base the meaning of 'myself' on was what of 'me' I knew best," she started, pulling them in. "I knew I was air and light and carried by the breeze; an intangible thing, an adjectival quality. Not a noun. Not an action. I had no meaningful interaction *with* the world. It was only the world which acted upon me."

She continued. They would see; 'Quiet' was a name which fit them to their core, including how well they listened. She had no doubt they could see from her perspective as if it were their own. They had done it before, with her. A 'her' with a bit more experience, a 'her' who had trouble being angry with them.

Could they do it again?

They, too, interacted uniquely with the world, and the world to them. She was a quality. They were a mirror.

When she had told Tabitha this concept, it wasn't received so readily.

"It's still a noun," Tabi had told her, "not just an elegant movement, but goodwill. Kindness. An inclination to reach out first, to see the good in people."

She had breathed in the pause Tabi created in her speech; she had taken a breath in the silence. The feeling was sensate; not performative, pretending to hold onto what she'd lost, but embracing everything she'd found.

"I'm just saying," Tabi continued, "even if you never changed, you were always as much of a person then as you are now. but let's see..."

(Agreement) She's right. You've always been a person.

(Correction) She was close; but I'm still in the process of becoming myself.

(Guidance) You don't need to denounce the person you used to be, to become someone new.

(Truth) I've always liked you.

(Tease) Even when you killed me?

(Cold) I didn't know you then. I didn't know myself.

(Consideration) ...

(Empathy) Maybe we're all a little right.

Tabi had been the first to ask her name, though she'd been one of the later people she'd gone to in the process. A lithe, elegant girl like her had a few reasons she might have had to avoid Gonchi — he was tangible in a way she could not communicate with, his heart beat in his chest, she'd seen him in compromising positions she'd rather not get into the details of — but he had been surprisingly supportive of her. A little choked up, even, when she admitted he'd been the first she'd asked about the topic. He'd told her the only meaning that mattered in her life was what she made of it, what she bent and broke it into by her own hands; she'd reminded him she often couldn't do much with her hands, and he'd outright scoffed in her face. "What a crock of shit; I've seen you, and you have a hell of a lot more drive than that. Where there's a will, there's a way. You'll find it if you go out there and make it happen."

'In the end, the dancing and the fighting and the running are intense,' she'd told Tabitha in so many words, reflecting, 'what I want to do most is to live. And when I feel most alive is when I'm not thinking about it. In the moments that pass by without comment. In the quiet assurance by the passing days that I'm still here. I'm still present.'

Tabitha had given her many names. None clicked too readily. Tabitha had given her many words. None sounded quite right. Tabitha had tried many forms, many sounds; she'd explained their connotations and connections to her. The ones of royal heritage, the common

folks', those named by trade; the young and the old and things outside of time; the feminine, the masculine, the nothing at all; people and places and natural wonders.

She could be so many things.

Tabitha was willing to give her everything in alphabetical order.

*(Confusion) What do you need **me** for? You're capable of defining yourself.*

(Insistence) I cannot find anything either you or she could not.

(Reminder) You're good at deciding on things, aren't you?

Perhaps, she introspected, Tabitha had just been thinking too hard.

"But I am not just a graceful *thing* floating in the air, and I am more than the ghost you made me," she told him. She drifted closer, her hands settling on either shoulder at their sides. It sent a shiver down their spine. It was fleeting yet effervescent; they could feel where they and her wound together deeper than the skin. And where they came apart. Where perspectives differed, where they built upon each other through contrast— through *comparison*. "Our first impressions of ourselves, I could have as a baseline. And that baseline wasn't much at all.

"I'm the person you see in me, too. The person I see in myself, the weight of my hand and the sound of my voice. And the closer what you and I see coalesce, the more of 'me' I find and share with you, the closer I get to 'her.' So I need to shed my dead essence. I need to revive, reincarnate into someone new. And I'd like that someone to be meaningful to you."

They spoke in tones they could not discern with their own ears. "You're already meaningful to me."

"Aw, thanks. So sweet of you to say." She leaned back from them, ducking her chin down with a coy grin. "But I'd like to hear a little more than lip service. Help me out here, killer."

He wasn't good with names, was the thing. He knew... descriptions, titles. Flowery language. Metaphor and allegory; words like sand and stone and bedrock, coming together to form structure and semantics and dismantling into their core components and built up and broken down and built and broken. A thousand paths which again and again and again came together at the same conclusion, circled around the same central meaning, spiraling in on themselves in an infinite loop.

She held his hands as he thought. It was easier to think of her when she was close; easier to grasp her qualities to ground himself on, pull her essence from their tethered hearts.

Her hands were cold like frost and fog and mist. Not unpleasantly so, not to the point she couldn't be touched. The kind of frost that was temporary, that would melt after a short while but linger for that same amount of time; the kind of frost which came back in the seasons, reliable in its presence, pretty in its permutations; the kind of fog that faded with the morning.

Impermanence, a natural phenomenon despite it all. A pattern broken before it would repeat. Loss which itself grew into something new; a regularity which was not constant. Something cold at first but getting warmer. Ephemeral. Gentle, despite it all.

There was a *word*...

...in *another language*. He felt it on his tongue; right where it needed to be.

“Rocío,” he tried. “‘Dew.’ The humidity in the early morning. You... smell like it.”

“I have a smell?” She asked, leaning in. He wasn’t sure if it was intentionally to let him check. Like petrichor; the hint of rain in nightfall. It was... nice. *Almost* calming. In need of some environmental context, soil and wood — pine maybe — to complete the landscape. He could imagine it. Dawn breaking through the canopy...

“Everyone has a smell,” he answered, to stop himself from getting carried away. He briefly wondering what his was. “Petrichor isn’t the same as rocío,” then he sounded it out for her benefit. “Roh-cee-oh. It’s the substance, not the scent.”

She didn’t have to take it, if she didn’t want to. He wasn’t good at naming anything. Maybe it could be good for a trial run, he knew how hard the naming process had been for some of his Voices.

“I could give it a try,” she said. That she could. There wasn't anything holding her in place.

“Your stay with me has replenished you marvelously, my little bird.”

Any room in which his Goddess resided tended to be fully illuminated. The Light She cast onto his skin now had taken on an even finer hue; a Light which perceived the veil of shadow and left him wholly undefined in Her wake. Prepared to be remolded and remade anew in the Light of Her Design, a shard of glass shaved and carved to perfectly reflect the Light cast in Her image. She trailed along his smooth surfaces with satisfaction in his transformations, palms pressed to his healed visage.

He had awoken expecting it to be of any other day. Slow, meticulous, his plans churning along through his strenuous and unthanked labor. But the moment Her eyes had set on him, She had *beamed*, Her visage alight in her joys and leaving him bewildered as to what of his lowly existence had excited Her so. And She had taken him away, and the day had gone from its typical everyday boredom to a whirlwind of change in an instant; blinding in its energy, overpowering in its presence. From neglect to overwhelm.

All to show him. To show him how his prayers had been answered. How She had made everything better.

All the wounds inflicted in his exile, through his time spent in devotion to Her glory, had faded. His face was pristine. She had succeeded.

She cradled him in Her embrace and cherished the work She'd put into him. She enumerated each of Her blessings, discovered and delivered onto him as model and messenger. His being was deliverance of Her glory, and he'd proven himself worthy of bearing the weight of Her potential.

He thanked her endlessly. He exhaled the words as if it were just everyday breathing, yet put his heart and soul in every word. She'd saved him. How could he not be grateful? *She'd* saved him.

He'd practically forgotten, in the Light, the darkness of his past. He could hardly remember for what petty reasons he'd ever bothered to stay somewhere full of people who'd only hurt him. He'd been struck. And She had taken him in. Protected him. Saved him. He was not worthy, and yet She held him in Her Hands all the same.

Her priest, Her good and loyal priest, who had walked the path to Her and sang the song of Her release from the chains which bound her. Unbound; a terrible and bountiful goddess, and the rewards She bestowed upon him for his submission and devotion.

Her palms moved to cover his eyes; the shade was unfathomably bright, light burning from the creases of her palms, Her divinity burning out from within Her, begging to be unleashed, begging to destroy him. Why would She resist for something as small and as meek and as insignificant as him? He pressed himself into the touch, yearning for that warmth, that damnation within. *Let me. Please. I need to be unmade.*

She chuckled, releasing him at once from Her hold. His world was cold and dark without her; empty, void of purpose, lost without meaning. The loss of Her was rectified by the clutching of his wrist, and he'd hardly noticed how the skin had started to bruise there, so familiar he was with the pain of Her demands. He rose as fast as his legs would allow him, though She wanted him faster still, Her impatient and him useless in his impudence. She would find a use for him; She always did, for She was brilliant.

He dared to glance, even as the remnants of Light still burned his retinas and left streaks of color in his vision. He would go blind for it, but it was worth it for the mere passing sight of Her beauty, Her radiance. She was smiling, his wrist bound in Her hand, and She pulled him upwards—his arm strained with Her towering height, unable to match Her gravitas, and still yet did his poor, small limbs try. A poor thing he was. He trembled with pitiful effort.

His hand was carried far into the air, the rest of him pulled up with it, and She interlaced his hand with Hers. His head felt light as his arm went numb, circulation cut off at the wrist and the blood in his veins falling to the demands of the wrong gravitational pull.

Something cold was in his other hand. He understood at once, gripping its handle and feeling the smooth, metallic edge of its spine with his pointer finger, what he was meant to do with it.

Borja could not assume the intentions of his Goddess, however. "Your Grace," he breathed, his lungs held tight in his reverence. A fond return to memory: bleeding internally, air in his bloodstream. His voice quivered in anticipation. "What must I do to repay your generosity?"

"Live," she commanded, and the bells rang True.

The heat of the blood running down his arm could not compare to the heat of the hand clasping it. But still, he was wracked with shivers at its travel all the same; all of him, numb and cold and empty, except what She deemed worthy of Her design.

Live. Until She tells me to stop.

In this moment, as he choked on his own gasps and the futility of his eyes' struggle to water despite how their insolence had already been burned away, he was alive. He lived. He lived for Her. He *was* for Her.

Hers. To command. To take, to change, to break. As pledged.

As pledged.

She held his hand. His legs gave out, knees connecting to the floor of Her temple as his head rolled and fell into Her awaiting arms. The collapse of the old; the birth of the new. She set the wound. She kissed it better.

“Good bird.”

All wounds closed, he walked out the door.

He was remade. He was reborn. He was alive.

He was happy, ecstatic. He smiled at Felipe, his eyes shimmering with Her Light, and Felipe stood struck by the image She made of him.

“My friend,” Felipe commented, amazed, “you are positively glowing today.”

“There is nothing Her Radiance cannot achieve,” Borja agreed, burning in his chest, an itch at his wrists. His lungs wheezed the last of his breath. To speak Her glory was to serve Her ascension; he had not paid minds to those self-inflicted holes in ages. (Quiet would have to soon. A glorious future to be foretold. A precious tome of his blessed past; the day he bore witness to Her Radiance, the day he shared Her Light.) “I am blessed with Her mercy this fine hour.”

“I’m talking about you, not her. *You’re* radiant. Thelka must know she’s blessed to have you.”

Borja could not find sarcasm in his tone or insult in his expression. It made him want to laugh, how *innocent* Felipe could be, at times. It made the burning of his purified body all the warmer. “A humorous inversion of the order of things. You speak such a glorious name on your lips, Felipe; your bleeding heart is all but built for tribute.”

Such childlike naivety. He spoke in oversimplifications of the reality of how things worked. Not *wrong*, no; his was a perspective lacking only in nuance.

Felipe smiled back, then, grasping Borja’s shoulder in his arms and leading him away from his Goddess’s golden gates. “Indeed, I know myself well enough to admit I’m only here to love and let love. But, nevertheless, the strength of my passions need not stifle my credibility in these matters. I speak only truths.”

He would understand in time. Borja allowed himself to be led; Felipe was no longer capable, himself or for Borja, of being led astray. He fed into Felipe's pride, gently nudging him towards the right path. "I am the one blessed. In worship, and in friends."

Speaking of friends...

He felt something.

An odd sort of... muted, almost, fondness; a nostalgia tucked away close to his heart, exposed by the gashes he made in his chest just this morning. A mourning. A recognition of a loss, and within the echoes of its memory and its pains, the hope of a rekindling for the fire which surged through his lungs once upon a time.

Carefully, so as to not worry the friend before him, he tucked himself back and faded someplace unknowable and unseen. He was skilled, at least, in being unnoteworthy; worthless, recognized only in disgust when he elected to raise his voice. Known as pathetic or not known at all. His pain would be overlooked if he did not express it; and, for now, this was what he wanted. To be, for a moment, unseen. Unknown. Deep within the bounds of himself, he reached, pulling at heartstring and the threads of his being, wondering...

...There were echoes, here. Sentiments. Messages waiting to come across, discarded at the moment they were granted but settling within him all the same. (*Hesitance*). *Wonder*. *Pride*. (*Truth*).

He felt... As he was made to do: he felt.

The burning in his chest felt different. Felt... subtler, more warm than painful, though his breath caught in a familiar sort of way. It stayed within him with a sort of silent acceptance that he did not have to heed its words; the words it spoke to him, the words it gave without expectation of a reciprocation. It gave. It did not take.

He leaned in, just barely, with the gentlest grasp, and *pulled*.

(*Doubt*) *Are you still here?*

(*Recognition*) (*Relief*) (*Reassurance*) *Always.*

(*Request*) *Are you coming back?*

(*Reaffirmation*) *Yes.*

(*Mourning*) *It's not the same without you. I need you here.*

(*Resolution*) *I am.*

How fluent it was in monosyllables.

It felt... right. Borja hadn't realized he'd been feeling wrong in the first place. Or maybe just that he'd felt *they* weren't right, before. (It was all wrong from the moment he first hatched in

the woods. They were hurting. They were still hurting, now, but it was different, it didn't feel the same. He wasn't there for them...) Something about this...

...He'd be there for it, now.

He took a deep breath and cleared his mind. There was a knock on the door. Felipe startled, but as Borja opened his eyes, he knew it was coming. He knew who it was. He'd called it. This vulnerability it was expressing now, he could use it.

He reached out. He'd been walking to it, just as it had been walking to him. Coming to reclaim its lost pieces. There was nothing holding it in place. Borja reached out.

Borja opened its door.

And there it was. Reaching out to him, just like he needed it to; everything was going to be alright. He'd make sure of it. He closed his eyes, again, and pulled it close. Pulled it in. So it could not pull away in time.

He let it feel useful; feel needed; feel...

Everything it craved.

(Truth) (Appreciation) Thank you.

(Surprise) How nice of you.

The appropriate answer should have been 'you're welcome', but he would take what he could get. He was only here to wait, after all. To stay as long as it needed him to. He promised that to it sometime, hadn't he?

He knew there were others at the door too. But he had nothing to hide. This was real. All of it. Every word; and more than that, every feeling. No matter what he was waiting on or hoping for; he wanted it to understand, and it would, soon. There was no greater reassurance than its weightless form warping as he molded it. Made to conform to the softest and most comforting of embraces.

It didn't have to be painful yet. Borja needed it to relax into him a little more. (He wanted...)

(Truth) I missed you.

(...Closer, still. There didn't have to be distance between them anymore. He felt it. Overwhelmingly, almost, his resolve wavering with the force. This was home; forgotten in sight and mind, but never in his heart. Truth would never fade; Truth could not be denied.)

(Familiarity) (Skepticism) ...

(Echo) How surprisingly sincere.

Looking through his eyelashes, eyes almost open. For a single moment, he had been unsure who he had been talking to. (He missed that Voice too. He missed all of them...)

A sudden change in attitude, in tension. The thread pulled taut, vibrating, *back*. There was something holding it in place. An anchor. The gentle tug of the current and its waves *stopped*, whiplash throwing Borja off his footing and forcing open his eyes.

It was digging its heels in. Blood flowed in torrents from its nose, hands raised in a cupping motion. It hid its face from his searching eyes. Distantly, he heard hissing.

Okay, alright. Listen. This is obviously a trick. Bad actors don't have sudden changes of heart; if you stay close to him, he will kill you. [Don't do it!]

Betrayal, fast and sudden and harsh, flickered through his mind. Burnt and brown and *ugly* in its deceptions. It ruined it; it ruined *everything*. He had it right where he wanted it, the perfect opportunity, and it—!

(Frustration) Ungrateful worm— heathen, defiler! Interloper of arrogant self-servitude!

Frustration burned in his throat and in his eyes, pitiful and screaming silently in choked-back sobs; rejection, always, the constant of his existence. (Never close enough. Never enough!)

*(Anger) Are you unhappy with everything the moment it doesn't revolve around you? What a sorry sight. A sorry, sorry **thing** you are. You lack even the barest concepts of empathy. Even a modicum of respect! Do you expect to be anything but alone after this, when they see who you **really** are?!*

A moment, frozen in time and in movement. A still posture, a crack of the mask, and—

A shadow swept across the room. Borja lowered, burdened by a sudden weight, a presence looming just over his shoulders. He hunched, then ducked, preparing for the strike — making room for Felipe to strike true. No words spoken or needed.

Quiet was not forged in preparation for force like what it had brought onto itself. Its feet were rooted in place; a harvest. In its arrogance, it planted a field of seeds of doubt, sown deep into the soil of the parts of it which it despised most: the parts of it which were shameful, which it thought it would excise, not realizing how its path to slash and burn had only stuck more seeds onto the soles of their shoes as it walked down the path of damnation.

Its arms fell to its sides, mesmerized by the sight, awestruck as blood trailed down from its nose in a thin streak and dropped from its chin. It could not hide itself from this. It sucked in one last futile, naive breath. Borja hoped for its sake it was preparing a prayer.

Rejection; the haywire trigger on the ticking time bomb, set off. Didn't it hurt? For his sake, just as Borja had trained him, Felipe would return that hurt a thousand times over. A painful lesson in obedience; but it was only to reap exactly what it'd sown. Action, reaction.

A comet, a streak of light, a predetermined path going directly to its heart. He could have sworn a star was beside him, incandescent.

The sound of shattering glass, refracting between infinite dimensions.

The sound of a door slamming shut, reverberating in one.

Truth. Borja's could have been warm. But Quiet did not choose him; they always preferred to do things the hard way. So the Truth turned hot, blistering. Painful despite the olive branch he'd offered; the only deliverance it ever seemed open to, in the end.

Felipe pressed in on them with such weight the wood around him splintered with a sound like crackling thunder. The lightning struck, and it struck true, as Borja watched it from above.

Oleander was not listening. Oleander did not listen. Oleander had not heard a thing.

His thread was as far pulled back as he could get it, tangled around him at his feet, door triple-locked and overburdened from the stress of the force trying its hardest to burst its way inside. It was a combined effort; synchronized, a near-perfect trap.

He could feel the heat of the words still, marked on his soul like a brand. No; no, the door was shut. He hadn't heard a *thing*. Not a single *sorry, sorry thing*. He was feeling the residual heat from the fire *Felipe* had set on *Quiet*, afterwards; a good thing he'd made his getaway when he did! Every man for himself in the event of a forest fire, you know?

And it was self-evident that Oleander was more than capable of living for himself. That was his own idea. He'd heard it nowhere else. His thoughts were one-of-a-kind, and at one point or another he'd taken pride in that. Taken pride in the thing he'd become for the sake of keeping himself alive.

It just made sense. What *idiot* would risk killing himself just to save someone else?

...The answer to that was pretty clear.

He swallowed a mouthful of blood again, head tilted back slightly to prevent the nosebleed. A unique kind of queasy.

Quiet. Quiet would. Quiet *did*. Too trusting. Too willing to forgive and forget. Too many times, really; this was just the latest hit on the record, and this time Oli had been front row and center. Perfect seating for the show; Connie would call it fireworks. Maybe he was right. Even pretty things could burn you if you were in the wrong place at the wrong time: in their path, right when they showed their true colors.

Oli cursed himself. Cursed himself because he'd nearly jumped on a live grenade.

He wasn't lying. Honest! He hadn't heard a thing. Not a single *right* thing.

He couldn't pretend empathy and grief hadn't been burning his soul from the inside out since the last of his stays at this cursed place. It tore him open. It ruined him. He could hardly stand it: this new thing he'd become, this thing that cared too much, this thing that did not care enough, this thing learning what it meant to care about others in the first place.

It stood to reason, then, that Borja was wrong. Blind. Delusional.

Or just plotting. It wasn't like Oleander to see the best in people, he thought. All he really knew was that he did not want 'Oleander' to be whatever image Borja hallucinated just now.

He was pretty sure he wasn't. At least in recent memory and name.

He was still behind the door. It was safest to remain there. Quiet was burning alive. It was safest to let them. He was already burned. It was safest to heal himself before thinking about others. He'd already put himself at risk. He was at risk now. They could hurt him without even touching him. His door kept him safe; *him*, alone.

The words kept echoing on themselves outside his door, to his one link. Fractals reflecting into, onto themselves. Mirrored, mirrored, mirrored.

Surely Quiet could see the baseless accusations for what they were? *Oleander* had hatched from him after all; wasn't that the highest compliment? The only thing that mattered?

Must be hard to see, with all the smoke.

Well— no. Damiana was the one who did all the fire-y stuff, right? This was just shadows, or whatever it was Felipe did. Oleander didn't know. Harrier tended to know those things. He tended to know that *Dami* was *fire* and *Feli* was *shadow* and *juuust* so happen to forget the crucial fact that *Felipe is halfway through burning our bridges out from under us, starting from our souls first*.

The ground beneath Quiet was dry, earthy yet unstable. With sufficient force, it would crack open and swallow them whole. Between Borja who had lured them there and Felipe who would do right by his original name and strike them down, it should have been a perfect execution. Assassinated on the spot. No witnesses — at least, no survivors.

Oleander notwithstanding. But he couldn't help anyone beyond himself.

Hey, just look what happened when he tried! *Great job, team. Knock-out performance. You killed 'em*.

He wiped the warm liquid collecting on his face, pulling back to see the blood smeared on his hand. It wouldn't stop coming. He swallowed the overflow back down again.

His thread was as far from Quiet as he could make it, yet that didn't matter much when one of the ends was *him*. Still moving, still pulling. Back and back and back. Another step, another, so maybe they'd stop burning. They had to at least stop bleeding.

His soul was a tangled mess of knots, or maybe it was a snake coiling its body backwards. Either way, the end of it all was that it was purely beneficiary for *everyone* if Oli got away.

Quiet's balance was poor on uneven ground. Oli wasn't the one who would catch them. He was just the one who put them in the right momentum and got their footwork going at the right tempo. He was humble; he let others take the fall for the plans he made that fell through. Or take the credit. Really depended on how it worked out.

Fernando caught on, all things considered, about as fast as Oli could've hoped. He'd at least stabilized them well and good before the second strike hit and stability went out the window. Well, you couldn't blame 'em for trying, could you?

A shockwave; burning light and blistering desire and blunt denial. Felipe's shadows tripled in size. Okay, okay. Maybe you could. Quiet was out of both of their hands now, either way. No harm done. To them. Quiet was on his own for the rest.

Quiet slipped. It wasn't anyone's fault, but he saw the way Fernando flinched regardless. Like it was his failure for not holding them up, catching them, anchoring them with his own body.

You know, if Oleander backed far enough away from this conflict, he could almost see it from an outsider's view.

You do keep them close, Oli thought to himself. *It makes them desirable, Fernando. To the worst kinds of people. Even to those in the middle with nothing better to do.*

Another shockwave; he braced against it, walled away, as Quiet shuddered and Fernando's hands shook in solidarity and rage from too far away to grasp their hands in his. Not without making Felipe even angrier. Distance, at the back of the flock, enforced under threat.

He saw the tension in Nando's spine, in the curling and uncurling of his fingers, in his balled-up fists and the imprints left in his palms where fingernail pressed too hard into skin. Restraint would only make the bolt to their side all the faster, when the time came; would only make the embrace Oli didn't deserve to follow after or request all the tighter. When this short-sided plan of theirs came to an end.

Wasn't that funny? And they meant for this to rip them apart. *Delusional*, Oli decided.

Connie was never calling anything 'fireworks' again. He never put it much thought into how they would feel as they exploded.

Oleander was not kidding, was Connie's immediate thought. Felipe was tall; towering, even. He loomed over even Borja, stood high and mighty behind him like a cast shadow, eyes staring down at a kneeling figure before them.

Quiet collapsed right in front of them.

This had to be a sick joke. Karmic retribution, because he had not been stabbed in his own route. Debt owed from a devil who thought himself above this.

He wanted to run. To turn around and leave. To be out.

He wanted them to ditch this place *with him*.

Words were escaping him; his lifeline, his essence. Words on paper, ink on page, catalysts and kindling. Easy ways of granting meaning. He just—he wanted out.

But what did 'out' even mean?

There was something outside of him, and it was *burning*. And Connie didn't feel a *thing* to match; not an echo, not a hint. Certainly not a *word*. All he knew was someone precious was

burning, burning alive, and he was helpless to stop it.

Talons, long and sharp, found purchase on the boundaries of the front door, still welcoming and inviting, as the shadow pushed itself outwards in approach. It— *Felipe*, Connie barely recognized, *he* was trembling in rage with the distortion of the light.

Quiet was near insensate, fallen onto their knees, drip-drip-dripping red.

Shadows encroached. One from the open door, and one from the crowd behind. It moved without moving, blink-and-you-miss-it, all of a sudden *before* them. It placed its thin, skeletal hand onto their shoulder.

They had been shaking. At Cain's touch, they went still. Unnaturally so; frozen. Their head lifted to look him in the eyes— and, all at once, he snatched them up.

No.

This was worse. This was worse. *This was worse.*

Connie couldn't breathe— couldn't think, but for the recognition. He couldn't. He just couldn't. He couldn't and Cain could so he did and he couldn't do anything about it.

His heart stopped. The burning stopped.

And nothing replaced it.

Providing the explosion started in air; being submerged would protect you from shockwaves, therefore doing less damage.

Harrier wasn't sure if that had been his thought when he half-hid behind Tabitha, thread wrapped around her shoulders like a shawl and hand on hers in a vice-like grip, but it helped him focus. There was him, and death around him, and a single spot of something cool. Something other than him. Meant to be soothing, yet he hissed at the contact of water against open wounds.

He couldn't let go. He couldn't be let go. *Cohesion: phenomenon of intermolecular attraction causing elements to hold together.*

His thread had hummed in a harmony that he felt in another way, deep within himself so long ago, when alongside Quiet and Fer they had talked with Tabi when they were in that cabin. Before curiosity dissolved whatever plan she had. In sync.

Above the surface, fire ravaged the world. Beneath it, he watched. It was cold, but cold wasn't bad; certainly not cold like hers, cold familiar and welcoming to him. Cold which shielded his skin without sapping the warmth of life from his muscles. It wasn't that much of a shock, submerged like he was.

A current. Cold with a direction. Where?

He wanted to swim, but there was air around him. He searched. Tabi's face was close to his, but her attention strayed, staring resolute somewhere in the distance. Her expression betrayed nothing, but he could still read that sharpness in her eyes. What had caught her attention in this mess? He needed to see.

There, easy enough to pinpoint with her acting as his pointer; in the eye of the storm, the center of the chaos, right where they'd been the whole time. Forced to kneel. (A clear implication: forced to worship, if time would permit.) Beside them, a familiar face, *not* where he'd been originally; without constant attention, he was surprisingly easy to lose track of. Grabbing the former by the wrist and yanking them onto their feet. Forced to stand. Violently. (Not permitted.)

Something at the back of his neck, where vertebrae met upper spine, felt especially chilled at the action. At the grip, tightening. (~~Sympathy pain.~~) At the eye contact, maintained. (~~Routine called for a 'thank you' at this stage.~~) At the—

There was something in the current. A carryover from distant waters, more like him than like it was like Tabi. Refracted light; crystalline like ice, translucent like glass.

(Disappointment)

At the *wordless judgement from the sharpening stone*. (~~Inconsistency; a lie. Material shaved without a point in sight.~~) Nothing to hold him back; nothing to keep him in check. No sense of moderation. (~~That was wholly illogical. 'Disappointment,' why? There was no reason he could see. And he was looking.~~)

A stillness. Time, frozen.

Cain's thread had tucked so close to the place in Quiet's soul where Harri originated, so utterly expansive in its grasp, that even *Harri* could hear the whispered murmurs in someone else's ears.

He knew by second nature that he wasn't meant to hear it. It was for Quiet alone, from Cain alone.

He was an extension of their heart; theirs sank, and pulled at him as it did. Even a stone could shiver and bleed, as it turned out. (~~Indignation~~)

Harri stared, but he was not a matter of Cain's attention.

Transfixed. (~~Potential of danger.~~)

Still holding their wrist. ~~It had to hurt.~~ (~~Hadn't it for him?~~)

Harrier must have grown accustomed to blankly staring at walls and ceilings and frigid eyes. The most he had the energy to muster was a single question; he had to make it count.

*(Disapproval) What are you **doing**?*

Sitting there for so long had altered his basest state. Something else moved long before Harri could. Something incorporeal; a memory he'd left dismissed.

A supernova expanded behind their eyes. It hurt— it *hurt*, that was all Quiet knew. It *hurt*. *St— it hurts, it hurts. I'm s— hurts! It hurts, plea— it hurts*. He couldn't see. He could only feel.

He felt. Light burning every cell of his body; in the mirror, an image reversed—

(HATE)

You're a horrid monster. If you felt even half the guilt you deserved, you'd throw yourself to the dirt with far greater urgency. Three meters under.

They felt. Shock, surprise, betrayal. Love to hate to ecstasy to agony—

(HATE)

The consequences of your cruelties have gone unanswered long enough. You've squandered every opportunity for redemption ever granted to you in kindness.

It felt. Golden ratios and bleeding wounds. Reduced to everything they were worth and liquified; its cup runneth over, over its hands—

(HATE)

You're beyond redemption. You're something worse; something inherently broken, lingering only to break the beautiful things which remain around you. Repulsive.

Eternity was a long time. Time got caught in the needle as the fabric stretched and folded. Folded over itself, tripled vision, inside-out and backwards. Backwards recollection, inaccurate narration and vertigo, overpowering. Overpowered and overwhelmed by a force so immutable, that time.

Time skipped like a record— Time jumped and doubled back— Time called its name like an order—

Order gave to chaos. Stagnation gave to change. Life gave to death. Gave and gave and gave; why had it *stopped*? What was wrong with it? Why was it so horrid in every choice it ever made? It just kept *hurting*!

Distantly, it felt— something. Distant, but still *something*. Gravity and vertigo and impact and pain; the slamming of limbs down onto a surface. Pressure built somewhere else, pain, grounding pain— its hands were clutching at its head, trying to hold it together. Its mind expanded. It shuddered. Then, when it could barely *think*, it cracked open entirely.

A reprieve from the agony and the heat and the pain. Scurrying down twelve passages at once. Heat, a different, softer kind, wanting to (*Help*) and telling them to (*Hold on*) and—

Please, Quiet thought, a fraction of a millisecond of eternity in the ageless galaxy behind their eyes—

The supernova dimmed. Threads hiding them from view. Something lifting them up.

A chill went down Quiet's spine. The man's voice was impossible to avoid inside their mind. It *scraped* at them. A recognition and a demand all at once. ***Look at me.***

They did. They looked to a desert of snow, a lone and level plane of air-dust and pristine past; vast and empty, silenced from the sound of churning wind or rippling tide, far away yet familiar and bound to them still.

They saw. A visage; a sculpted and lifeless thing, pale crystal and gemstone and solid ground beneath their feet. Cold command; the friction on their buckled knees beneath them, their body dragged, pulled by the wrist to stand.

~~It didn't feel like anything.~~

They did. Their mind ~~clouded, cleared,~~ corrected: ...they'd been helped to stand by Cain.

By *Cain*...? Right. They'd been helped to stand by Cain.

Nothing less, nothing more. It was nothing to them. ...They felt ~~lightheaded~~ ...nothing. They kept looking at him. He preferred it when they maintained eye contact.

They couldn't see very well. Couldn't quite recognize... They blinked, vision... vision blurry? Vision... hazy? ...Vision tunneling, a vacuum in the pit of their perception. Their peripherals were... ~~leaking, altered perception, failure to process~~ ...hard to describe. It was hard to think.

It was *really* hard to think. They just knew they'd fallen. And Cain helped them stand.

He did not let them go. Not in hand or sight or... ~~It hurt. It, the hurt and the hold and the regard, intensified with their return to awareness.~~ ...There was something of a sneer in his expression; disgust— no, disappointment. They shrank from that expression. They felt small again. Appropriately small.

They didn't need to think. They were just here, outside, in the cold: the wind cutting through their layers; the chill piercing through them from the inside. With him. With Cain. With... others, too. The others were distant; he was close. And they were looking at him. He held their attention with the same eye contact he always did; cool, level, unwavering regard. There was so little to read into, yet the moment stretched so far. He held their attention like he held their wrist.

Cain was using his bandaged hand. Though he wouldn't allow them much mobility, not enough to pull away from him, they turned to see their own palm in his hold. A small scar dividing thumb from palm; self-inflicted, they remembered. They just kept hurting themselves; getting themselves into trouble, getting themselves hurt. Their eyes drifted to the ground at their feet; grass. They... weren't at the front door anymore...?

Scraping, again; a call to *pay attention*. Their eyes jerked back upwards. ~~He told~~ They needed to look at him.

Right. *Cain* helped them. It made sense; he'd pulled them back, he pulled them up. More to be disappointed in. ~~A hint of (*Skepticism*), muted far inside, pushed deep down beneath all the ice.~~ They settled back into reality, standing on their own two feet.

Memory fragmented. (Lost?) The pieces weren't fitting together in this realignment.

What... happened?

It had not been as bad this time. *Ciro* wasn't sure if that was a good thing. The initial blow had landed, and it had landed *hard*, but it had landed centralized. Focused. Sharpened.

It was a mere passing wind to him; he hadn't been close enough to feel anything but the momentum, the *rush*, the full-body drop and vertigo in his bloodstream, but *Ciro* did not fall. Nor did *Winnie*, as he could feel with his thread around her left elbow, her tail fluffing up. It wasn't meant for them. —*That* thought was sure fucking comforting.

If he focused now, closed his eyes and shut out the world, he could still feel it sitting like a weight. Like a trap, a tripwire or a bomb; ticking. Just *waiting* to be set off again.

Fuck that. He opened his eyes and swallowed it back. He'd started to move, but the air moved before he pushed it; swirled, coalesced, and formed. They'd said one thing or two about mist and rain, gentle things, things that *Ciro* wasn't and didn't have the exact words to describe.

He could describe a stormcloud though. And that was what *Rocio* had started to resemble. Her dark hair billowing around.

She manifested before *Felipe* in a flash, quick and bright and blocking his line of sight. Breaking his focus. He pulled back, something like startled; he stammered something in that stupid voice of his. Some bullshit. The weight lightened.

'Grace,' this did not resemble in typical form. Dark and brooding and bursting with pent-up energy and rage, seconds off from lighting up and striking a man down where he stood. A dragon protecting its hoard.

Justice being served. It made something in him hum.

"Do you know how ghosts kill people?" *Rocio* asked, voice a lethal whisper, traveling on the air. *Felipe* stared in open interest as she pushed forward, invading his personal space and floating above the ground to confront him face-to-face.

"Keys and screwdrivers. The energy it takes to interact with small things like that..." Her voice trailed, head lolling partially to the side as her distracted eyes drifted to *Felipe's* chest. She placed a hand on his chest, his eyes watching the gesture with overblown intensity. He

flinched at the contact, at the cold, and glanced back up into the depths of her eyes. “It’s simple enough to reach in and squeeze someone’s heart until it goes *pop*.”

Ciro watched with slight shock as the hand Rocío had oh-so-gently placed on Felipe’s chest... just sank straight through him. Along with a portion of her forearm, just past the wrist. Felipe stopped, frozen solid, stuck in place. His eyes were huge, locked onto hers, her face so close to touching his with her as pressed into him as she was.

Eyes lidded in concentrated focus. Eyes wide in unguarded anticipation.

His breath came out in shaky, misted gasps. Like he could *feel* her in there. Hitched. Like she’d found something. Something precious. Something fragile.

“*Thump. Thump. Thump.*” Rocío narrated, a smile splitting across her face.

Felipe smiled in turn. It wasn’t nearly as perfect as usual, something strained and brittle. “I must say, I see the resemblance now. How each of you maidens came in pairs.”

“Oh,” Rocío leaned in, the angle of her wrist in his chest twisting just the slightest degree, her voice rasping in disgust, “I’m nothing like her.”

Felipe’s face twitched. Ciro couldn’t tell if it was voluntary or not. “And yet you excel in making my heart race the same way.”

Before Ciro could process the words (and how he wished he didn’t), he saw how Felipe’s face seemed to fall when Clara brightened. As long as she wasn’t paying attention to *them*...

Behind Ciro, Connie darted forward with a quickness Ciro had seldom seen on him. Between blinks, he half-dragged, half-carried Quiet to the back of the group by the scruff of his neck. He stumbled backwards a step or two after Connie let him go, glancing back behind him to the front, to the ongoing commotion — and to Cain, still standing where Quiet once was beside him, staring straight ahead.

Ciro didn’t much like paying attention to the freak, but he *was* noticing now how... unnaturally still he was. It wasn’t just that he hadn’t reacted to Quiet ducking out from the action. It wasn’t just that his eyes were staring straight at Felipe and Rocío, specifically at the point of contact where one would imagine hand met heart. Ciro didn’t even think he was breathing.

Connie wasn’t concerning himself with what was happening in front of them. Ciro could feel the worry like it was his own as Connie put the back of his hand over Quiet’s forehead, letting go with a barely-audible hiss.

“¿Qué le pasa?” Ciro asked.

“Vuela de fiebre,” Connie answered grimly.

Quiet was trying to dismiss them. Ciro trusted Connie to tell them they were being fucking stupid while he scouted the situation again.

Clara had managed to twirl in from god-knows-where. He caught the tail end of Rocio pulling out, hand unnaturally clean of the viscera he hadn't really realized he was expecting to see, and backing off uncomfortably from Clara's presence. He didn't know if she had organs to turn off, but he could understand not wanting an answer to the question.

He refused to feel disappointed that she'd only threatened him; taking a life couldn't be easy when you had lost your own.

He opted to glance away once he realized Clara was trying to brush Felipe's shoulder and whisper something in his ear. Just in time to notice Cain apparently get bored enough to check and realize Quiet had left his side.

Ciro wasn't close enough to gauge the expression. Ave, a ways ahead of him, took a step towards the center of the group; probably just about as promising as a reaction as he'd assume, then, which was 'not-at-all.' Though *not* dread-inducing; Ave hadn't crouched down. Small wins. He'd take what he could get.

He felt a small twinge of regret once Rocío flew back around. He would have liked to see that side of her some more. She landed near Quiet, who was (where else?) settling in to Nando's left. Already there was a sheen of sweat on his forehead.

The blood still draining from their nose was wiped away, pointlessly, with a thumb. Quiet moved his head away from the contact, bringing his hand up to cup at his nose, and Nando stole their line of sight. They shuddered, wracked with unnatural fever, and Fernando's head ducked down to press their foreheads together. They had to be burning up, still, but Nando didn't seem to mind.

Ciro would prefer they were clean of any blood, considering the chimera. He glanced one more time in Ave's direction; Ave caught his look.

Blood excited them. They liked the look of it; the weakness, the game; the way it made them feel, how it glistened and coagulated, how it tasted in their mouths. *The red splatter. The metallic scent.* It was better not to get them excited.

Ciro had the best chance out of all of them to escape with his life. He didn't like those odds.

The looming shadow in the doorway was brushed aside, Clara separated from where her gloved hands had started to latch onto his arm and pushed out through the open front door. Her arms stretched out, partially... *detached* from the rest of her, it almost looked. In broad daylight, a billowing gloom obscured the gaps in her form, where arm-length gloves ended and dress spun in the air. Plethora held one of Clara's gloved hands taut, bound to her still, pulling her aside from the rest for a one-on-five.

"What part of 'leave the violence for after' did you not understand?" Plethora sighed, groaned, whined, hissed. Their eyes on eyes on eyes squinted at her, or maybe just squinted in the daylight made harsh by contrast with the shade of Clara's form. "They haven't even passed through the door."

At least Ciro could agree with them on that much; this was fucking ridiculous. Could they catch a break for a second? Just one second of a breather?

Clara twirled back around and behind Felipe, eyes somehow even wider behind the mask. “That wasn’t me! That was all him!”

“And what was it he’d done to himself?”

Inside the house, it seemed either Felipe or Borja had given their answer, because Plethora’s heads turned sharply towards the door, eyes narrowing. In skepticism? Curiosity? Horror? With so many to watch, their expressions were functionally unreadable.

They rose, standing up straight; almost regal, in the way their posture was poised and their composure collected. Their eyes scanned the crowd.

Ahead of him a short ways, Harri tightened his grip on Tabi’s palm; a certain skepticism of Plethora’s intentions evident in the gesture, even as Tabi squeezed his hand back.

Behind him, Quiet had recovered enough to take a glance up and reorient himself to his surroundings— perhaps by rough luck or unfortunate nature, making direct eye-contact with Plethora. Half of them seemed to smile warmly, half coolly assessing his state; the front, in contrast, did not emote much, merely beginning a brisk walk to his side.

Ciro intended to share a glance with Paco about that — surely he’d find it just as odd — but instead found Paco not paying them any attention at all. No, those eyes of his were trained on something else entirely. Ciro hesitated, caught between too many details to watch for at once, and ducked and wove his way through the crowd to his friend.

“Paco, what is it, what’s gotten you like this?”

“That’s not what she looked like before,” Paco muttered beneath his breath, voice hissing like a hex, a different form of cursing. “A single slip, and that’s all. It only took a *second* for her to be changed.”

“What are you...?” Ciro murmured, following his line of sight. “Shit.”

Paco could be cryptic on the best of days; and sometimes, he truly did see things... differently. Indistinct, shifting and pulsing when it never truly moved. Lies from eyes which sometimes chose to deceive him; eyes which sometimes had to rely on other pairs to verify what he was seeing.

Ciro could theoretically verify him this time. Not that he could describe it. But Dami... she didn’t look quite right. A wavering edge to her form, eyes just a touch too bright and shimmering with light reflected from nowhere. Her hands were clasped together as if to stop them from shaking. She looked shaken— but, just... *too* smile-y about it.

“How desperate are they to regain control of her?” Paco asked.

“I don’t know,” Ciro said, glancing back to Winnie. He hadn’t been standing next to her; and now, with how he’d wandered, she was a good distance away.

Her ears flattened at his attention, tail puffing in discomfort. She glared at him back. “What? Don’t look at me like that.”

He willed himself to latch onto that image of her as she was. It felt like her. Snappy and spiteful. It felt right. *Don’t change. Stay like that.* He repressed the slight smile forming on his face for her, turning back to Paco. “Is there anything... *around* us?”

“It’s always around us,” Paco whispered back. “It’s never going to leave.”

Well, fucking great reassurance that was.

“It’s alright; you’ve made your way back,” Plethora reassured. They were a fair distance off from crowding around Quiet, though frankly Ciro would prefer they took a few more steps back. “We’re doing this for all of us. Though we’re glad to see you again, you don’t need to force yourself; we can wait for you as long as you need. Our own are in check. Though you might want to get a better hold of *yourselves* before you step inside.”

“Yeah, we’ve got it,” Nando responded for them, curt. “Thanks for the advice.”

Ciro wanted everyone to shut the fuck up for a second, really.

“Let me through,” someone *else* decided to speak up, gods— Tabitha, dragging Harri behind her by the hand. That was a bit reassuring, actually. If Tabi was fine, that meant Winnie *probably* was, too. That didn’t really explain why Dami wasn’t, though. Unless it *wasn’t* just this fucking-bullshit house’s doing and the fucking-bullshit person scrubbing their brains of original thought.

“Dami-Dami-Dami, what’s wrong?” Tabi hurried.

That wasn’t her usual manner of speaking, like something was chasing her and she had to say as many words as possible with a single breath. She held her sister’s face in her hands, staring into her eyes like she was searching for something inside them — some spark that was flickering in and out of awareness. Her breath was hushed tones and reassurances.

“Everything’s okay!” Dami responded, *far* too chipper. Shrill. Like a shrieking baby bird.

“That’s not right,” Harri commented beside her, and Tabi hushed him harshly.

“Don’t talk about her like that— Dami, don’t listen to him. You’re absolutely right; nothing’s wrong with you, okay? It’s alright. What’s got you like this again, are you scared? *Did he scare you?*”

There was an *edge* to her tone at the end, there, despite her best attempts to sound soft and comforting. Ciro mentally counted her in their plan to kill those two. It was beginning to be a crowded affair... though things were usually pretty crowded between everyone, anyway. The noise was familiar.

“Of course she’s scared, she’s out of her mind with it,” Paco reported. “Her heartbeat’s so fast it’s practically a continuous sound.”

“Everything’s okay?” Dami repeated.

“Yes. Breathe with me, okay? You’re doing great, sweetie, don’t listen to them. Just focus on me— just focus on your sister, here,” Tabi took her hands in hers. Dami barely seemed to react at all. Were Tabi’s hands always that much... bigger, than her twin’s? She had to have been taller this whole time, but the height difference felt so much more emphasized now.

Dami just looked so... small. Like she was made to be swallowed up. Ciro was starting to worry it wasn’t his eyes playing tricks on him. Felipe *had* looked taller, before...

“Everything’s okay,” Dami repeated. Like a broken record. Like she didn’t know what else to say.

“I know, I know, I’m here,” Tabi replied. As if it was something else. Anything else. “You’d been doing *so well*...”

Dami moved. Shaking arms tried to wrap their way around her sister’s torso. She couldn’t quite manage it. Ciro couldn’t imagine how; she just moved like she’d forgotten how to operate her limbs. Too stiff. Like a doll. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be,” Tabi reminded, gently, like consoling a child. Something about it made Ciro feel sick. She didn’t return the attempt at a hug, just kept holding Dami’s hands, thumbs rubbing circles into her digits like she was trying to wake up limbs that had fallen asleep. “You’re going to be alright, we’ll be back home soon.”

“Everything’s okay! We *are* home now!”

Tabi flinched. Stumbled over her words, halfway between a correction and praise for denying her. “I— that’s...”

Paco backed up, a tremble in his legs. He latched onto Ciro forcefully, pulling at his arm.

“It’s getting to her,” Paco hissed in his ear. “Asserting *its* reality while hers is vulnerable to *alterations*.”

Once again, Ciro had to manage a quick glance to Winnie. She was fine. She wasn’t the one at risk. He still wanted to hold onto her another second though, just to be safe.

Gonchi pushed his way over, Ciro knew because he was almost sent to the ground in his wake. Knocked out of his minor spiral, at least. Gonchi knew his way around grounding a man. Intentionally or not. Good thing, too, because being nearly stampeded over by Gonchi was nothing compared to the train that was Ava, just behind him— then overtaking him completely, running to Dami’s side.

She stalled, unexpectedly; hovering just at Tabi’s side. “How long has this one been?”

“Everything’s okay,” Dami answered.

“I’m not sure, a few minutes, I just got here,” Tabi said, barely sparing a glance in Ava’s direction. “I think it started when Sir Noodlelocks started having his meltdown. I can’t

believe he did that in *front of you*, Dami. Well, I can, but I still reserve the right to be upset for you here.”

“She’ll bounce back, she’s faced tougher,” Ava reassured, raising a hand to pat Dami on the head. She pulled her hand back sharply; not as if burnt, but as if touching an unsavory texture.

“She needs someone to pull her up before she can bounce back,” Gonchi said, watching Dami with a certain glare in his eyes. Something in the definition of her was distorting. Softening around the edges; bloom lighting, blurring her away. Like a ghost, or a half finished drawing. “Crock of shit, ‘I’ll save you the strain.’ I can handle a double shift anytime, neither of you are of any burden to me.”

At the same time, Harri was moving, arms almost weaving a pattern in front of him, while Oli straightened so quickly Ciro could hear the *crack* of his vertebrae in the way he shot forward.

“Hey, hey, heyyy, what’s going on over here?” Oli greeted, walking circles around the group; pacing, really. “I know a congregation when I see one, just what is it that’s got us all in a fuss? I believe I’m a bit of a problem solver, don’t you worry about it, I’ll get us *right* back on track...”

On and on he went, around and around he paced. His gesticulations and gestures had a certain direction to them; trying to spin a new web, where the old one was lost.

“Everything’s okay!” Dami smiled warmly at him, proud of her announcement.

“Uh— yeah! Sure is!” Oli agreed readily. He glanced at Tabi, confidence straining. “Right as rain, from the looks of it.”

“Did you leave her *alone*? Through *that*?” Tabi’s arm raised to point to the doorway Felipe had once been standing in.

“*Whaaat*, no, no way, who do you take me for?” Oli denied. He still had dark-red tracks on his face that spoke of being... not at his best. His face transformed, mouth set into a line and eyes narrowed and he grabbed at her shoulder as he hissed low. “I was being attacked.”

Tabi shrugged him off, an almost panicked urgency overriding her typical demeanor. “Don’t pull me *away* from her right now,” she hissed back, turning to Dami again. “Look, lots of people are here for you now.”

Dami didn’t seem to register that, continuing to stare, wide-eyed, just at Tabi.

And then... she blinked.

She didn’t look *right*, but she looked a touch more stable. Her eyes shifted to the speaker of the conversation as Oli took center stage, responding more properly to her environment again. “I can help her, too,” he corrected, wiping his hands together as if he just finished a bit of handiwork.

“I-I’m okay,” Dami mumbled in her uncertainty, and some kind of knot in Ciro’s chest loosened just a tad. Something *different. Finally.*

He glanced over to his shoulder to see Winnie watching the scene with just as much investment. She tip-toed her way to him, glancing back at Winnie again twice. “Is she herself?”

“I think so.”

“Breathing’s steady,” Paco agreed.

Winnie didn’t look like she knew what to make of that. “...Good.”

Ciro glanced away from the clusterfuck in front of him, pulling at his thread for a spot of attention. Inquiry; pointer. Quiet was watching; he heard the sound of their resigned sigh on the whistle of the wind in the trees around him. An answer.

(Worry) (Resignation) That happens when she gets overwhelmed.

(Horror) What the fuck is it?

(Focus) ...I don’t know. It’s usually my fault.

(Reflection) I guess it still is.

(Distraction) Still want to step inside?

(Direction) There’s no other choice here. It’s time to end this.

“You know what color the sky is?” Tabi was asking.

“Blue,” Dami answered, then ducked her head down. “Grass is green. You’re wearing jeans, a yellow jacket and boots with wool interior. It looks nice on you.”

“Thanks,” Tabi replied drily.

“You’re not looking too bad either,” Oli added, and Tabi smacked him on the arm. He clacked his teeth together.

“It... it feels cold,” Dami stuttered, glancing up. She looked briefly panicked— *normal* panic, thankfully. “Is it supposed to feel cold?”

“It’s winter. The grass was covered in frost this morning,” Tabi informed her. Dami nodded, rubbing her arms. Tabi hugged her for real that time. Dami closed her eyes, returning the embrace. Something settled. Nothing was wrong with that image; it looked just about right.

(Tangent) (Humor) You can’t see it, but Dami looks like a christmas tree.

Ciro had an idea of what Quiet meant by that; the faintest mental image.

“You’ll feel better once you head inside,” Plethora said as they brushed past the group, heading through the front door.

That sounds like a threat, *Ciro* thought in retaliation, though of course they didn’t hear him.

Ciro expected *Ave* to tense. *Paco* too. *Oli*, even. *Nando*, though?... *Ciro* had gotten distracted. What did he miss from that conversation?...

...*Ciro* blinked, suddenly realizing — and scanning the group one more time as they hesitantly began to shuffle their way through the door — that *Rocio* was... missing? Gone? He couldn’t find her. *Nando* and *Connie* had taken to flanking on either side of *Quiet*, at the back of the line; she *couldn’t* be with them. Unless she was already inside.

Rushing to get this over with? He wouldn’t blame her; he had half the mind to skip the line and just start himself in position, skip the preamble outright.

Fuck it; he had the *whole* mind actually. If he was going to be forced to stick around here, he’d at least be getting a good seat. He didn’t pay too much mind to the fact he’d become accustomed enough to the layout of the living room to get his alignment spot-on. Or the fact that the walls around the room seemed to have shifted a centimeter or two inwards since the last time he was here, even if the inner layout hadn’t changed.

That sounded insane. He probably just remembered it wrong. He was letting *Paco*’s whispers get too far in his head.

He scooted where he sat, making sure there was enough space at his side for *Winnie* to join him if she so chose. Didn’t matter if the house was changing if they didn’t stay long enough for the changes to matter. And they wouldn’t.

Thelka was already in position. She stared at him, at the place he appeared. Something of a smile graced her features. “How curious. So you’re the one who made the getaway.”

Ciro made eye contact, righteous, and chose not to say a word. *She must have already known the ace up his sleeve. He had not fucked everything up yet.*

Borja was settled in neatly beside her, nearly in her lap. Her hand cupped his side, keeping him there, occasionally stroking him with her thumb. A comfortable tuck for her, maybe, but her fingers were poking into his ribs.

Ciro caught half a wince in *Borja*’s expression at any minor movement. He, though *Borja* liked to discredit him, was fairly well-versed in the language of pain, himself, and it was abundantly clear to *Ciro* that something was wrong with *Borja*. He was barely moving, as if something inside him risked tearing if he did. Reopened wounds. Nobody would go to her side willing. Not that it inspired any sympathy on him, given everything else.

Ciro had never really thought how teleporting made his thread stretch and tense until he caught sight of *Winnie* walking into the room, his thread tangled around her in a way that couldn’t be comfortable with how tight it was.

Then again, he had never really thought the threads could hold any tangible qualities until the proof was right in front of him. He still wasn't sure what rules he played at; it'd gone unspoken, implicitly understood, until all of a sudden it wasn't anymore. Until the questions were thrown in his face.

Harri was supposed to be the one with questions, not him.

(Answer) (Skepticism) He shies away from you, but you still tangle together often enough.

He sent an absentminded thanks at the answer. His thread pulled, gently laying around him. Like an arm, maybe. Or a wing.

(Admission) It's nice to know you care.

(Clarification) About everyone. Even after everything.

He paid enough attention to recognize it'd kept its place nuzzling into his side even after the message went through. He felt accompanied by that awareness.

Winnie settled in beside him. He watched as discreetly as he could manage as his thread wove around her; it was an electric thing, never quite still, always spiraling with a certain built-up energy. It slowed for more delicate motions. He wouldn't risk strangling her or getting caught up in himself. Tension loosened, going slack around her shoulders.

For half a second, he almost thought to ask her if she felt him around her. And then he remembered who he would be asking that question to, and resolutely looked away before he caught him staring a third time. He didn't feel like getting clawed again. She'd been vicious enough *unconscious*; he didn't want to know what she was capable of when she was aware of where his arteries were placed in his arm.

That his thread settled more securely around *her* arm at the thought, well, he didn't know what to make of that. He wasn't a masochist.

Oli was leading the group in, reasserting his role as Dami's tether and anchor in this place, Tabi and Harri following to join beside them. Into position like military units.

Ciro's thread hummed warmly in recognition. He let himself listen.

(Fondness) Oli tends to tangle, trip himself up. The speed at which he pulls away whenever he realizes he's gotten 'too close' is remarkable.

(Pride) I think he's been getting closer, though, recently. Not just to me, either.

(Conspiracy) ...Don't tell him I said that. I don't think he'd want others to know.

(Confusion) Wait, how does he get tangled if there's no ends to these things to speak of?

Maybe he could convince them to sit near him. Dami and Winnie could ground each other. Tabi, too. And Ciro could keep an eye on everyone.

Well, not just him. He wouldn't mind having Harri around too. (Quiet sent him something like *vindication*, clearly delighting in being proven right so quickly.) He was observant in a different kind of way; and Ciro had started to appreciate his company, when he wasn't a shambling husk of himself or leaving the light on in their room to tear through a book the width of his skull hours past midnight. That usually ended with Ciro employing guerrilla tactics in the name of getting sleep.

First they had to *get here* though; and unfortunately, with Dami still wavering at the edges like refracting light through hot air, that didn't seem to be a simple operation.

Ciro hesitated, but ultimately was still compelled to ask.

*(Inquiry) What's **his** thread like?*

(Pain) ...It's gone.

(Hurt) It's just gone. He ripped away from me; he's not coming back.

(Spite) Good riddance. He's bad for us.

Felipe approached with all the subtlety of a stampeding bull, with the volume to match. And yet he'd barely gotten half a word out before he'd taken one step too many and reached a hand out a few centimeters too far, and Dami's eyes raised alongside her clenched fists and she'd taken a step back and raised her voice and—

There was a flash.

A light, for a fraction of a second, encased her form— flames rippling at the edges, embers flicking out and reaching to burn Felipe's outstretched hand— and snuffed out as they rose from below, shooting off and twirling into spirals in the open air. For a fraction of a second, there was a halo of fire above her head.

She finished her step, voice a cut-off yelp. Hands raised between herself and him in intangible barrier. Embers still dusted her skin and highlighted her hair in yellows and orange in the aftermath, flickering out.

Ciro exhaled, impressed. That was an amazing self-defense mechanism.

The light of the fire danced in Felipe's eyes. For a second, he seemed surprised. For a second, he seemed to disengage. And, a second later, something in him seemed to *brighten* in response, hands not heeding the warning and taking Dami's outstretched ones as offering. Ciro hoped he would burn to a crisp, but lady luck didn't grant him the wish.

"I see the flames of your passion don't need kindling, beloved," he murmured, ducking his head down low to her face. Leaning in.

"U-um—!" Dami stuttered, and Felipe smiled a hair's breadth away from her face.

A smell like burning. He breathed words onto her face, voice low and dulcet. Something only meant for her; something Ciro did not hear. Something short; sweet nothings, promises. A sickening swooping sensation in his gut. Smoke rose from their clasped hands.

Clearing his throat, Oli stepped in, hand gently grazing Dami's shoulder enough to pull her back a single step and angle her away from Felipe's pursed lips. There was relief in her posture, shoulders raised defensively and skin a gentle blaze all but where Oli held onto her. She twirled around to stand behind him, a careful grace to her steps.

Felipe's hands pulled back, evidently just become aware of how they'd been burned, skin red and irritated and blistering at his palms. He sucked in a breath through his teeth, leaning back into proper posture.

It was disgusting, how he managed to look just like a man in an instant. Not like a wolf hulking over a particularly savory piece of meat, salivating at the sight.

There was something about Oli's eyes. His teeth glistened with something, made apparent by the flame's glow. It set Ciro's heart on edge. "Excuse me, pardon me a moment, but I think you interrupted our conversation. We were talking business, my friend!" he told Felipe, as if he had not felt afraid for his life. "She'll start to go to the Bellas Artes school, hair styling. Oh, didn't you know? I'm just advising her on what she should do once she starts getting clients, and she was telling me about getting a new haircut. You know how much pride I put in my appearance."

Incredibly, like they had rehearsed it, Damiana picked up right where he left it. "You really should stop putting products on your hair. You're not only a fire hazard; that's why it has no texture."

Oli stalled a second, then nodded right along. "See? She's already quick with the advice. Dreams are well and good, but what about *logistics*? We've got to deal with those pesky little details, and I've always been the man for the job there; you know me. Come, come," he beckoned, turning entirely to Dami and striding away from Felipe in a cloud of meaningless babble.

Ciro supposed he was good at baffling people with bullshit.

Tabi cut Felipe a *vicious* side-eye as she followed her sister's trail, Harri in tow, who was watching Dami with an intense concern in his expression. He whispered something to Tabi, and she disengaged from her threatening stare, nodding at him in return.

Felipe got only two, maybe three seconds of staring after her. Ciro could hear the steps in the first one. Was filled with anticipation in two. By the third one, he got front seats to watch Ava grabbing Felipe from behind by his arm, yanking him backward like a ragdoll and then reversing the momentum to slam him into the nearest wall. It resounded around the room.

"You better *hope* you aren't stupid enough to 'let us watch' a display like *that* again," she warned, hand wrapping around his head as it bounced backward. She spun him around to face her, other hand pulled back in preparation to keep pummeling him. "You *clear* on that?"

Ciro couldn't stop himself from grinning. He was liking that woman more and more.

"Ava." Plethora's voices rang out in clear reproach. She bared her teeth at them. Maybe she was hanging out a little too much with Ave... "Control yourself."

"How about *he* learns how to handle *himself*?"

"We don't have jurisdiction over that," Plethora said, rolling their eyes in annoyance and shaking their head in resignation and frowning. "But just because those outside of us make choices we cannot predict or change does not mean we have to give up on our own impulse control."

"But—"

"Enough. Let him go; the time to escalate our conflicts is behind us," Plethora said. "We're not here to hurt anyone."

"Tell that to *him*!"

"You said it yourself; 'he'll handle himself.'" Plethora maintained eye contact as they glanced away. "We can't make decisions for him. They will always be *his* choices; we can only hope to guide him onto a satisfactory path, one which he wants as much as we do."

Harri's eyes were narrow behind the glasses.

Ava growled, releasing Felipe roughly, not caring to steady him off the wall and onto the ground. "Fine! I'll 'guide' him the way I choose to, how about that?"

And promptly elected herself Dami's bodyguard for the night, storming over with heavy steps and planting herself right beside her, glaring daggers at Felipe. Dami put her hand over Ava's, and she briefly softened, glancing back to her with a slight remorse in her expression. Gonchi, in contrast, stayed by Felipe.

"We'll be great," Gonchi told them through gritted teeth.

"Of course, Plethora," Felipe said, dusting himself off in a partial daze. "How grateful am I to have you here, in all your wisdom, to show my... acquaintances and I, how to handle ourselves in the presence of royalty."

The sooner they started, the sooner they could go.

"Can you?" Plethora teased, derided, asked, aimlessly gesturing with open palms and pointing forcefully towards the computer, already set up with the game prepared to launch. "We'd be delighted to see you try, if you're offering."

Felipe blinked, taking a moment to comprehend. "Of course; why, it'd be a delight for myself. I'm sure I'll uncover something for us all to marvel at together!"

And now Ciro was certain he'd die of boredom or secondhand embarrassment.

The rest of the room filed in without greater incident and only minor note. Plethora had offered to sit closer to Quiet, though it seemed Nando and Connie elected to fill in all available spaces. That was for the best. They looked better, now, in the short reprieve following the attack. More grounded. Something like (*peace*) and (*calm*) pulsed through their thread to Ciro, likely for everyone. He hoped they included themselves in 'everyone'.

He had almost managed to learn to tune out the Narrator's introductory speech, by that point. Almost.

The Narrator

You're on a path in the woods. And at the end of that path is a cabin. And in the basement of that cabin is a princess.

You're here to slay her. If you don't, it will be the end of the world.

- (Explore) The end of the world? What are you talking about?
- (Explore) But how can a princess locked away in a basement end the world?
- (Explore) If you don't tell me why she's dangerous, I'm not going to kill her.
- (Explore) Do you have any evidence to back this up?
- (Explore) Have you considered that maybe the only reason she's going to end the world is **because** she's locked up?
- (Explore) Killing a princess seems kind of bad, though, doesn't it?
- (Explore) Can't someone else do this?
- (Explore) Forget it, I'm not doing this.
- (Explore) Have you considered that maybe I'm okay with the world ending?
- (Explore) Do I get some sort of reward for doing this?
- Oh, okay. Thanks for telling me what to do.
- Sweet! I've always wanted to off a monarch. Viva la revolución!
- [Silently continue to the cabin.]
- [Turn around and leave.]

It came as a minor shock to see Felipe actually scrolling through the menu, seeming to consider his options. "Such a foul setup and scheme He's plotted for us. It cannot hold a candle to even the slightest pressing for details; the clear sign of a liar and a snake."

Harri, who was mostly resigned to idly watch Felipe make a mockery of their experience, sat up partially as Felipe clicked the second Explore option of the list.

Ciro himself hadn't expected Felipe to *engage*.

- (Explore) But how can a princess locked away in a basement end the world?

The Narrator

Don't linger on the specifics. You have a job to do here. Just get in there and do what needs to be done. We're all counting on you.

- (Explore) If you don't tell me why she's dangerous, I'm not going to kill her.

The Narrator

She's not dangerous. She's just a princess. The danger comes if she gets out. Which she will. Unless you do something about it.

“We already asked that!” Razor complained.

“We’ve already explored most of everything, here,” Tabi agreed. “Why go over this again? Were you ‘not paying attention’ the first few times we went through this?”

“There’s no harm in staying in the woods a while longer,” Nando said.

“And there’s no harm in asking Him these things again; it’s not like He remembers us. We have better context now for His cryptic answers,” Harri said. “It’s smart.”

“Why, thank you,” Felipe preened before turning back to the screen. His hands hovered over the mouse and keyboard, hesitating; Ciro wondered if the burns on his hands made it any more painful to continue. “Though this miscreant speaks only lies.”

“He’s just trying to manipulate us... but even *lies* might have a kernel of truth to them,” Paco conceded.

“It’s so vague. ‘The danger comes if she comes out.’ Unless ‘the danger’ and ‘she’ are... separate concepts...” Tabi muttered into her hands. “Like that Thing is to us?”

“It’s possible He’d know about It,” Harri said.

“That *would* explain the oddly specific condition,” Plethora spoke up. “We didn’t intend anything to happen; it was just part of our nature. Things unfolded as they had to, and we took meaning from what we could.”

“An actor has to immerse in the role given,” Felipe explained, “while giving it their unique spin!”

Something strong sparked across Ciro’s thread. A flinch; an involuntary (*shock*), sharpening Ciro’s attention and raising his shoulders. It simmered in him, pulling at his attention.

(Righteousness) You’re not a ‘role to play.’ (Rebellion)

Something echoed back at him; light and similarly energetic, with the same spark, but without the same bite.

(Confirmation) Huh.

*You and Connie really **are** twins.*

If Quiet was intending for Ciro to lose his train of thought, they managed it effortlessly.

“Are you talking about that thing we saw on our trip down the stairs?” Connie asked, turning to look at Quiet and Ciro in the same angle. He tilted his head as Quiet ‘spoke’ to him back.

(Reminder) Inside voice, Connie.

Connie trilled noncommittally. “I think some things get funnier without context.”

Quiet’s thread was concerningly... quiet. Likely talking to Connie alone. Ciro didn’t like it when Connie and Quiet got on the same wavelength, especially when that wavelength didn’t include him. It was suspicious.

“For example,” Felipe was continuing, “I shall lead us to victory using the best navigational tool we have.”

“A map?”

“A compass.”

“Can use the Crux in a pinch.” Harri added.

“The heart,” he corrected. “How in the worlds are those meant to help us here?”

“You couldn’t even remember the way here,” Gonchi protested.

“I didn’t have to.” Felipe almost seemed to preen. “I knew the way here through non-empirical means.”

“And yet you don’t seem to know the way out,” Ciro barely heard Tabi muttering. Harri’s shoulders were shaking.

- (Explore) Okay. What happens if she gets out then? I want specifics.

The Narrator

The more specifics you have, the harder it will be for you to do this very important job. She's a princess. People will listen to her, because listening to her is in their nature. And when they do, everything will come crashing down.

- Okay. Fine. I'll go to the cabin.

The Narrator

Good. As long as you remain focused on your goal, it should all be smooth sailing.

Some things never changed, like the path to the cabin, at first. Ciro was so sick of cabins and woods and whatever the fuck sort of trees those were. He could ask Ave. He didn’t fucking care.

The Narrator

You make your way up the short path to the cabin. You'll find the Princess within.

A warning, before you go any further...

She will lie, she will cheat, and she will do everything in her power to stop you from slaying her. Don't believe a word she says.

Voice of the Hero

We're not going to go through with this, right? She's a princess. We're supposed to save princesses, not slay them.

The Narrator

Ignore him. He doesn't know what he's talking about.

- [Proceed into the cabin.]

Felipe hesitated briefly before entering the cabin. Like he wanted to say something. Ciro hadn't known he could hesitate in normal circumstances; even more surprising, then, when he elected to proceed without comment and keep his mouth shut.

The Narrator

The interior of the cabin is almost entirely bare. The air is stale and musty and the floor and walls are painted in a fine layer of dust. The only furniture of note is a plain wooden table. Perched on that table is a pristine blade.

The blade is your implement. You'll need it if you want to do this right.

- (Explore) [Take the blade.]
- [Enter the basement.]

"Perfect," Razor said, almost quietly. Ciro had all of half a second to wonder what the *hell* she meant by that before she whistled, long and shrill and ear-piercing, and screamed just as obnoxiously, "Beastie, the boring part's over!"

In an instant, Ave had transformed from a squatted sitting position to standing on all fours in his seat. In the next, 'Beastie' — the chimera — *sprinted* down the stairs, talons clacking against the flooring. She leaped over the couch as if it were no more than a practiced obstacle — Ave ducking low and dodging beneath her — and swiftly made her way towards Razor's side. Who scratched her behind the ear.

"Good recall!" She cheered, and the Beast glared at her. "No, you've had enough treats today! I just wanted to show our guests your new trick."

"You keep the lion jumping hoops at the circus," the Beast said, climbing up onto the couch and turning circles before she sat, "and eventually it will jump on *you*."

Ave's breathing was short. He hadn't taken his eyes off the Beast since his — apparently unnecessary — dodge.

Plethora caught his wide-eyed stare and laughed. "It helps her exert a little extra energy around the house," they said by way of explanation.

Ave shook his head, uncomprehending.

Paco started chanting something under his breath.

“Impressive,” Connie said to fill the void in the talking space. “You have her trained on a whistle?”

“*My* whistle,” Razor said, leaning down to hug the Beast around the neck. “We have a special bond, don’t we, Beastie?”

“I play for food,” Beast denied, “of which you have not delivered. I won’t be coming next time you call.”

Razor gasped, pulling away in mock offense. Everything was always a mockery with her.

Then again, he didn’t want to see her serious and focused.

“What’s your ‘unique spin’ here, Mr. Actor?” Plethora spun the conversation around, inquiring, teasing, mocking Felipe. Some of them were laughing. “Taking the blade for once?”

“I would never mean any of you harm,” Felipe stated easily. “That blade is nothing but a symbol of unprovoked and senseless violence; it is a cruelty my compassionate heart cannot bare to partake in. I’d nary even consider it; my Heroic companion here is most honest of heart and noble in deed. We shan’t lay harm onto the maiden held captive in these chambers.”

“You don’t need a *knife* to hurt someone,” Clara giggled.

“Agreed,” said the Beast.

“It makes it a *lot* easier, though!” Razor said.

Clara nodded. “I think we’ve seen as much already, the harm you’re all capable of.” She raised her hand to adjust the angle of her mask. Her fingers lingered at its edge a second longer, pointer finger poised to dig beneath and pry it up, then dropped her hand as casual as could be.

Who knew masks prevented you from self-reflection?

- [Enter the basement.]

The Narrator

The door to the basement creaks open, revealing a staircase faintly illuminated by an unseen light in the room below. This is an oppressive place. The air feels heavy and damp, a hint of rot filtering from the ancient wood. If the Princess really lives here, slaying her is probably doing her a favor.

Her voice softly carries up the stairs.

H-hello? Is someone there?

Voice of the Hero

It's hypnotizing. It's the kind of voice you only have to hear once to remember it for the rest of your life.

Ciro *guessed* he'd remember his murderer's voice for the rest of his life, but that wasn't how he'd put it. More like he'd just never forget it.

Nando had taken to avoiding everyone else's eyes at this part. Ciro wondered if he even knew Felipe in particular chose to pause here to glance back at him. Ciro wondered what Nando would call an expression like that on his face. Personally, he thought Felipe looked a little pretentious. That know-it-all look didn't do his features any favors. Smug prick.

What *was* with Nando in these first chapters, anyway? He didn't tend to think of matters of love, and yet there he was, charmed by her. Subdued by a single "hello."

The Narrator

Don't let it fool you. It's all part of the manipulation. You're playing a dangerous game by coming here unarmed.

- "Hi!"
- "Just checking in on you."
- (Lie) "I'm here to save you!"
- "Hey, I think I'm here to slay you?"
- Continue down the stairs.

"That can't be right."

Surprisingly, Felipe took the words right out of Ciro's mouth.

The mouse hovered between the second option and the (Lie) beneath it. "We aren't *dishonest* in our intentions. This is all we want."

"But it is far from all we can *be*," Plethora amended. Their hands rose, one pair clasping to a rest at their heart. "We've seen everything pure devotion can offer us. But we are more varied than perfect first impressions, as hard as we may try to emulate them."

"We must still have it in us to try," he argued.

"It seems from where we stand that you don't!" Plethora said, clapping joyously and lowering their hands, spreading them out by the wrists at their waist. Their voices were cruel, sadistic, cynical, sad. "How fun. So, you will lie? To her, and to yourself?"

"No; I am no snake."

"It isn't in your nature; we have already walked such a path," they agreed.

“Hey, uncalled for!” Oli interjected. “Just because that’s true doesn’t mean it’s right.”

Sometimes, Ciro thought, Oleander truly had to learn to shut up. This was not that day.

Ciro caught a slight wince in Felipe’s hand as he pressed down to click the next-best option. So Dami *had* done something to him after all. Maybe he’d think twice next time.

- "Just checking in on you."

You are? It's been so long since anyone's come down here. I was starting to think they'd forgotten about me.

“Who is ‘they’?” Harri asked.

“The people who locked us down there,” Tabi answered. “More of a hypothetical than anything. If we wake up down there, someone had to have *put* us down there; we can’t lock *ourselves* in chains.”

“That logic is ironclad,” Oli said.

“My shackles were merely manifestations of the hubris of those who would defy me,” Thelka spoke up, apparently under the delusion that her word in this conversation meant anything to anyone. “An allowance made for the symbol they became in our stories. They are so easily subverted; a fragile thing which crumbles before any force of will.”

Tabitha’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Wish fulfillment is nice and all, but those chains were still real.”

Thelka shook her head as if talking to a young child. “Appearances are tools of deception to the eye. Your confinement was a matter of the war between doubt and belief.”

The shorter woman’s shoulders raised as she took a deep breath, huffing in the frustration of a conversation that has been repeated too many times before.

If ‘belief’ was all it required, then what happened to Ciro wouldn’t have happened. What happened to Paco. To all of them.

“But what about later? You’d acted like you’d seen someone else—”

“Spoilers!” Connie interrupted Harri, grinning innocently when Harri turned to glare at him.

“I had. You.” Tabi poked him in the side. “Was I supposed to know you’d come back to life?”

Harri’s hands came up to protect his side. “You said you’d see us in the next life.”

“Anyone *could* have walked down those stairs. Even if I preferred it to be you.” Tabi shrugged. “And it’d only make sense, initially, to connect you to an ephemeral ‘them.’ But either way. You gave up the game rather quickly.”

“It couldn’t have lasted long with Him in our head,” Harri defended.

Oli snickered to himself without comment.

“I was right,” Connie said. “This is *way* funnier out of context.”

The Narrator

You walk down the stairs and lock eyes with the Princess. There's a heavy chain around her wrist, binding her to the far wall of the basement.

Voice of the Hero

She's beautiful. How could someone like this be a threat to anyone?

The Narrator

I am begging you to stay focused. There's a lot riding on you here.

Ciro couldn't correlate the man he knew with the Voice on the screen. The Nando he knew understood full well how appearances could deceive, the way it didn't matter how cute she was if she was twisting a knife through their guts until it reached the other end, corkscrew style.

For a moment, he felt the pain and warm blood running down his legs and bones shattering. But there was a thread holding him in place.

(Reassurance) She's not going to hurt you.

(Resolution) I won't let her.

He grasped the lifeline and shook himself out of it. This wasn't what she was like at the start, anyway. He associated these beginnings more with Winnie than her. Still a stabbing involved, but that was par for the course.

More evidence for his point, anyway. Winnie was plenty dangerous. Dami, too, on a second thought; it wasn't fair if they weren't. Otherwise they couldn't defend themselves.

He knew that between their hatching and now there was a world's difference, but he had never expected Nando to be so... *naive*.

Was it... fair, for his assumptions to have been proven so wrong so brutally?

Hi! Do you think you can get me out of these chains?

- "Hold on. Let's talk a bit first..."

Ciro liked games. Hiro had played some games in his short existence. And he could recognize when things were balanced and when things were unfair. This was a perfect example of the latter, there wasn't a 'choice' to make if there was only one option. Especially when there used to be *two*, here.

“Wait, what?” Nando sat up at once.

“Uh...”

There were scribbling noises; pen on paper. Ciro caught Harri’s eye. There was something almost angry in him.

Felipe cleared his throat. “Well, it would only be most polite to introduce ourselves and get to know the fair maiden!”

Morbidly, Ciro wondered how having only one way to proceed felt like.

(Retrospective) ...I didn't notice. There was just one path forward and I walked it.

I couldn't remember anything was taken from me until after it was already over.

- "Hold on. Let's talk a bit first..."

O... kay.

- (Explore) "What's your name?"
- (Explore) "I don't know anything about you. For all I know you're locked up down here for a reason."
- (Explore) "If I'm the first person you've seen in a while, what have you been eating? Or drinking?"
- (Explore) "I was sent here to slay you. You're apparently supposed to end the world..."
- (Explore) "What are you going to do if I let you out of here?"
- "I'm sorry, but I just can't trust you. This doesn't add up, and it isn't worth the risk to take your word over the potential fate of the world." [Retrieve the blade.]
- [Go back upstairs to retrieve the blade without saying another word.]

(Apprehension) Even when so much was missing?

(Truth?) '...It hurts to forget at first. But then you forget the pain.'

(Inquiry) Who are you quoting?

Something chilled drifted through Ciro’s thread.

Oh. She *was* inside already. Wisps of someone else intertwined between the two of them, curling in as his consciousness turned its awareness on Quiet’s returning passenger.

Did it feel weird to third-wheel like that?

(Uncertainty) ...Myself? I think...

“I guess we know what we’re doing this time.”

“...do we?”

It was a lot easier to lose track of conversations when one wasn't in charge of Deciding.

"Retrieving the blade does not necessarily mean we will be using it for violence," Felipe said.

Harri and Tabi shared a glance. The latter rolled her eyes.

"Sure," Winnie drawled, tail flicking beside her. "I'm sure slinking away in search of steel, wordlessly or not, implies all *sorts* of good things."

"I don't slink!" Oli said, crossing his arms. "A knife can be for all sorts of things."

"Right. Like stabbing in the back, or maybe from the front?"

"I like where this conversation is going," Razor interjected. Killing the conversation dead, as she did.

- (Explore) "If I'm the first person you've seen in a while, what have you been eating? Or drinking?"

I don't see what that has to do with anything.

"That's ridiculous, everyone needs to eat," Ave muttered.

"If that were true," Paco whispered, "she would have answered instead of deflecting."

"Grace doesn't eat," Plethora pointed out. Quiet winced.

Ciro felt compelled to speak. "Does too."

- (Explore) "I was sent here to slay you. You're apparently supposed to end the world..."
- "But I don't think you're actually dangerous."
- "But I wanted to see you for myself. I'm still not sure what to believe."
- "I'm starting to think it's true. There's something about you that doesn't feel right."

Felipe didn't even hesitate before hovering the mouse over the first option—

"Wait," Harri requested. To Ciro's slight surprise, Felipe did. "We should think about this."

"I *am* thinking—" Felipe protested.

"Why is there no 'say nothing' option? We can usually say nothing," Nando commented. He moved to lean forward, but unfortunately for him, he'd been leaning on Quiet's shoulder first, and thus managed only to bonk the both of them on the head in a truly efficient maneuver. "Ow."

"Maybe we're supposed to be. Maybe *that's* gone too," Paco whispered. "Can we trust anything when we're so stretched thin? It's like our thoughts aren't even our own anymore."

"Maybe the game's breaking," Ciro said.

“There’s already a middle-of-the-road option,” Tabitha pointed out, “why would we *also* have the option to be quiet?”

“Because—!” Nando said, then shut himself up abruptly. “Because we could before.”

“We have been railroaded before, too,” Paco said.

“Or maybe you just started a statement and need to finish it,” Tabitha said. “We’ve been dancing around this topic the entire time we’ve been doing this, but we’ve finally managed to corner ourselves. We’ve seen enough. You brought it up. You have to have an opinion, now.”

“And I do—” Felipe started.

“Hush it,” Tabi interrupted. “Let the voices have their chit-chat, hmm?”

Ciro expected either of them to pull out a bulletpoint list. He had been rooming with Harri long enough to know that was his go-to method every time he roped into a debate that lasted longer than his patience. Point one—

“It is truth, and a fundamental one at that,” Thelka started, completely throwing him off center. She stared through the monitor they all sat around, the ethereal light from her eyes competing with the electronic glow of the screen. “The world is destined to end at my hands.”

Connie made a show of looking around. He had barely opened his mouth when Nando dove past Quiet to shut him up.

“Though it is I who awoke to my nature first and took that power into my hands, it lies latent in each of you. That raw, awe-inspiring potential of destruction,” she spoke, rising, Borja at her lap completely forgotten. He fell to the side, staring up at her — staring in wonder, as if she did not disregard him so openly. She did not grant him a single glance, her eyes instead scanning the group in the room, lingering on each of the girls.

Winnie held an impressively unimpressed glare. But Thelka was unmoved by it, turning instead to lock eyes with Dami. Her smile turned serene.

Felipe exhaled. “Madam, you cannot be implying—”

“And who gave you the right to intervene on my council, worm?” Thelka’s voice boomed. Dust shook free from the ceiling above, painting hairs white. Borja huddled down lower— no, he *bowed*. In *reaction*.

“Your ‘council?’” Connie mocked, mouth running too fast for Nando to shut up.

“Who gave *you* the right to decide who speaks and who doesn’t?” Ciro said, emboldened on the winds of Connie’s short-sighted hubris.

Thelka glared at him. Her hair billowed around her like a halo; the dust particles in wake of her outburst floated around her as if in orbit. If Ciro had to give her any credit, it was that her look really suited her: self-important and dense as all hell.

“We’ve been over this one! No, I didn’t end the world!” Dami announced, turning heads, all smiles. She giggled; Ciro had never heard her fucking *giggle*, what the fuck was that? “I wouldn’t even know how!”

Harri glanced back to Tabi like he was searching for answers. Oli’s frown was so deep it made craters in his forehead.

“You see?” Felipe said, expression softening, gesturing to her with open arms. That had to hurt. “That angel is the absolute picture of innocence.”

Dami’s eyes sparkled with the affirmation. Literally. With a light to rival Thelka’s own.

Shyly, her hand raised to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear; distracted, that hair twirled around her fingers. She tilted her head in the direction of her hand; it lolled to the side, weak and empty and succumbing to the force.

(Tension) Hey what the fuck.

(Panic) Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it.

Oli held her head up for her, nodding at her as if he were having an everyday conversation. “Playing dumb, very smart; that’s what I’d do in this situation, too.”

“And she has far more power within her than I’m sure *you’d* prefer,” Thelka said, the full weight of her attention bearing down on him. **“Return to your role. You will only play your part as prompted.”**

All the challenge in Felipe’s posture went slack; Ciro hadn’t even realized it *was* there, but he surely noticed its absence. It should have been reassuring. It wasn’t. He never thought he would have longed for Oli and his strange ‘door.’

It was similarly disconcerting, the change in Thelka’s eyes when her gaze shifted from Felipe to Dami. The way the anger beneath boiled, then settled into a low simmer. The way he... agreed with it.

Dami’s head righted itself. Murmured something.

“Psht, nothing to apologize for,” Oli dismissed, retracting his hands and folding them securely in his lap.

She visibly seemed to relax. Winnie was fidgeting; Ciro could hear her nails picking at the couch cushions (could have been worse, could’ve been his thread). Tabi offered her sister a hand, and she took it after a moment’s hesitation.

“Thelka’s not...” Tabi swallowed, face contorting in apparent distaste. “...wrong. We’ve seen it play out four times now. When we exit the cabin, the world ends.”

“No,” Ciro corrected. “We left the last one behind to rot, as deserved. And the stairs still fuckin’ vanished on us.”

“Sometimes the world ends even when you’re *stuck* the cabin,” Winnie said, backing him up even as her tail whipped behind her. “Every one of us could have been taken while in the cabin.”

“The world ends when you all are taken, no matter where you are. Maybe you’re the failsafe, maybe it’s the other way around,” Nando offered. “Thorn didn’t know what was happening, it can’t have come from her then.”

“In the end, nobody wants to leave,” Quiet murmured. Something heavy was laying in his thread. They sounded a world’s width away.

(Agreement) (Curiosity) Who did that one come from?

(Lie) ...No one.

(Grief) Anymore.

...Ciro held onto his thread a little tighter. It swayed by an unseen breeze. Back and forth, like a pendulum.

Quiet’s eyes tracked the motion. Then closed, relaxing into it.

Back and forth, back and forth. Up and over, down and around. He crossed around them a few times for the practice, for the reassurance.

More *rope* than ‘*thread*’ at this point. Very little chance of fraying.

“They would’ve been told to protect us if that was the case,” Winnie bit back, a hiss in her voice. *Ciro* sort of was protecting her, now, not that he’d say that aloud.

“Some of you could be dangerous,” Connie admitted freely. “I wouldn’t feel comfortable with *Fury* out in the world.”

Ava crossed her arms. “Dangerous to one person is one thing. Bringing the whole world into it is another.”

“Exhibit A, Clara! She killed us more times than we can count!”

“Excuse me? You *made me* do that,” Clara balked. *Ciro* snapped his attention over to *Paco* — and snapped to catch *his* attention and bring it on over to him.

“We are *not* having this conversation again,” *Plethora* snapped, warned, sighed.

Clara settled. *Paco* did too.

Razor whistled. (The Beast’s head perked up from where it’d been laying on her front paws. *Ave* flinched.) “Playing with fire poking at a banned topic. I love it!”

Harri glanced between *Tabi* and *Plethora* like he didn’t know who or what to ask or accuse first.

“What happened in *your* cabin?” Tabi asked abruptly, staring right at Plethora.

Ciro expected Connie to yell ‘spoilers’ once again. He didn't get the yell. He didn't get a single word.

From either of them, for enough time to become a lapse in conversation.

Plethora was still; oddly still, strange and unnatural to them. Their faces were blank, each pair of eyes staring forward on their own; five different vectors, all pointing towards nothing in particular. Just the direction an eye in a socket defaulted to. Their arms were still at their sides. Loose.

The lights were on, the doors were unlocked. But no one was home.

Until finally, one voice rang out from the quintuplet. Morose, tired; her voice hung in the air like a noose. Resigned. Swinging without real momentum, moving yet going nowhere. Tied in place, bound to death. “Nothing? Everything? It doesn't matter. There was never any meaning. We never left. We never had a chance to leave. We never had a chance to be or do anything; we might as well have not even been alive.”

Connie was wracked with tremors. He hiccupped.

Ciro's thread swung like he was about to play jump rope. It changed angle at the highest point. Towards Connie's general direction. And there,

(Guilt) I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so so so sorry—

(Advise) Whatever happened, and I don't know because you never tell the rest of us anything that happened — and you should if that is any indication — but regardless.

(Inevitability) It was all that could be done.

The threads braided together. The same movement felt heavier than usual, more difficult to perform.

(Truth) It's not your fault.

Ciro watched ‘Plethora’ carefully as he continued to rock Connie's thread with his own. They... *she*, didn't seem as open as the rest of her system. She was despondent, barely present; staring down at her feet instead of looking anyone in the eyes. She looked down at her hands like she didn't know what to do with them. Or what to do with herself.

She pressed her palms into her eyes, then pulled back, blinking. She looked up at the ceiling, then back down to her body. Her hands dropped futilely. It felt like a surrender.

With the way she put it... a surrender to existence.

(Insistence) None of it was fair.

(Guilt) Because of—

(Insistence) It wasn't fair to any of us. You included.

Connie broke his gaze away from 'Plethora.' She wasn't looking at him anyway. He melted down into his seat like a sad little puddle.

"No matter what we do," 'Plethora' sighed, "we'll never be free. We'll always be connected to Her."

"The Thing in the Dark?"

"Is...? Yeah, sure, call Her whatever you want. She won't answer."

(Grief) ...

Ciro kept swinging. It was a little easier. He wasn't sure if that was because Connie was feeling better or if he was just getting better at doing this, but he was getting a feel for the rhythm of it.

(...Curiosity) What are you doing?

(Nonchalance) Playing.

They were real. These threads, these extensions of them, had weight and tension. Thanks to the others, thanks to who Quiet was, it could grow from a string to a rope, from nerves to muscle.

...Now there's an idea.

(Chalance) Plotting.

(Mischievous) Being evil? (Self-deprecation) I can help with that.

"...Well, right *now*," Tabi argued, "we aren't. She's nowhere to be seen. And when we were *in* that cabin, she hadn't quite caught us yet. We have *some* independence; so even if the Entity's dangerous, that doesn't mean *we* inherently are, too."

'Plethora' lifted their head, something glistening in their eyes. She managed, for a fraction of a second, to make genuine eye contact with Tabitha. A tear trailed down her cheek.

Plethora's arms, as if disembodied from the rest of them, rose independent of 'Plethora's' epiphany. They reached around their head, around the face the morose personality occupied; cupping her chin and neck, patting the top of her head, covering her eyes.

And then they cracked their neck, movement sharp, their entire body jostling with the swift movement — limbs going rigid — all of their faces wincing in certain pain.

And then their hands unfurled, all of their faces realigned.

"*Whew*. Sorry about her," Plethora said, clearing their voices as they rang out as one once more. Ciro listened for the sad one's. "She has some trouble seeing past herself. We're alright

now.”

...He couldn't hear her.

“What were we talking about? Hard to keep track between switches,” Plethora explained with a smile and a smile and a smile.

That was...

...

“We... we just finished up, actually,” Harri managed. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Nando said beneath his breath.

Dami's eyes were huge. Her face was almost as pale as Clara's mask.

“Unless anyone has any last minute additions...” Oli trailed, then turned over to Felipe. “I think that's it, team! We are *ready* to move on; decision has been made!”

“Is it a good one?” Felipe asked, turning with an unimpressed look.

“The *best*,” Oli grinned. “Since we're looking to get on the right footing with the woman we're about to hurt and all. Might as well butter her up, eh?”

Felipe scoffed. “So, in the end, induction lands in the same square intuition would've gotten us in *without* any of that rabble.”

- "But I don't think you're actually dangerous."

I—is that why they threw me down here? But I don't want to hurt anyone. I like the world! I think.

I don't remember much about it, to be honest. I've been down here for so long.

Voice of the Hero

That's... How long has she been locked away?!

“Too long,” the Beast answered.

Did they tell you how I'm supposed to end the world?

- (Deflect) "What are you going to do if I let you out of here?"
- "I've been told enough."
- "I was hoping you'd tell me."
- "No. But I'm sure they have their reasons for keeping that information secret from me."
- "No. Which is why I don't think you're actually dangerous."
- [Remain silent.]
- "No. Which is why I don't think you're actually dangerous."

The Narrator

Sooner or later you'll learn to trust me. Hopefully it won't be too late when you finally come around.

Thank you for believing me. Now can you help me get out of here?

Stubborn idiot, was Ciro's only thought. *What did you think that'd do, magically unlock a secret route to save her again?*

The menu was as unchanged as ever. Except for all the choices they'd already made, gone from the list.

There was no other ending for them here.

"I've stated my belief and intent as best I can by the foul divisions which bind us," Felipe stated. "Surely you may infer a blade holds dual purpose? Not merely *just* a weapon to strike at hearts, but a tool as well which may free you from your bindings."

"And yet you didn't take it at first," Harri drawled.

"Quiet now!" Felipe said. "This is no time to be consumed by doubt."

"I'm not doubting, stating a fact."

- [Go back upstairs to retrieve the blade without saying another word.]

The Narrator

Thank you.

"Oh," Dami uttered, seemingly unintentionally. She sounded genuinely impressed. "That's polite of Him."

"Doesn't mean much, Cain can be polite but he's also a dick." Ciro felt the need to remind her. He expected to hear something from someone in response, but there was nothing.

He turned towards Quiet, concerned. Justifiably so.

(Observation) You look lousy.

(Sarcasmo) Gracias por lo que me toca.

(Insistence) No, I mean it. You don't look well.

They didn't grace him with a response. Luckily, he didn't need *them* to.

(Explanation) We're... 'bracing for what's coming next.'

The Narrator

You turn back to the stairs, intent on retrieving the blade in the cabin.

Where are you going?! You can't just leave me here!

You'd better hope for your own sake that I don't slip these chains before you make it back down here.

Voice of the Hero

'Slip these chains?' She can't, right? She needed our help to get out of here. But do you hear the conviction in her voice? I don't think she's bluffing.

The Narrator

She has to be bluffing. But... I'd hurry if I were you.

“You’re having another debut? I’m so jealous!” Razor sprung up and managed to wrap her arms around a floating Clara, suspending the both of them in midair for a moment.

“That’s not possible,” Tabi mumbled, glancing at Harri. She reached over and grabbed his hand, pulling it into her lap.

The Narrator

You rush up to the first floor, grabbing the blade, both yours and the world's only possible salvation.

Voice of the Hero

Okay. If we're sure about this decision, I'll support it. I suppose we have a world to save, after all...

The Narrator

You slowly creep down the basement stairs. It's quiet.

“Darker; it’s *always* darker,” Paco whispered.

“Aww, is someone *scared* of the dark?” Clara sang. “Is someone trembling in their seat thinking about being locked in a cold, stone *box* all alone the whole night? With someone who might choose to kill you at a moment’s notice?”

“Real mature of you.”

“We can light it up,” Felipe offered, nonsensically — *completely* illogically.

Razor tilted her head. “What is *with* you all chewing up your arm?”

Ciro could practically feel the moment Ave stopped breathing. His eyes were almost as wide as Paco’s, tension evident in his posture.

Back and forth, went the braid, aided by Connie—

He *almost* had him.

The Narrator

Where the Princess sat only a moment ago, there's only a severed arm, its cooling flesh still chained to the wall. And she is nowhere to be seen.

Voice of the Hero

Is it just me or did this room get a lot bigger?

- (Explore) "Hello?"
- (Explore) "I think we got off on the wrong foot. Do you think we can start over?"
- Let's finish this.

"The room isn't bigger. You're just smaller," Borja said.

"Oh fuck off." Ciro spat.

"I don't think she wants to talk," Oli said, pointing at the screen. "The arm means she's desperate."

"This is a misunderstanding; leading with words first is always better than senseless violence," Felipe stated breezily. As if he couldn't even see what was in front of him. The signals all around him blaring *trap* and *danger*. "We have nothing to fear so long as we're leading by the heart."

- (Explore) "Hello?"

Why don't you come closer? I have something to show you.

"Bad idea."

"Agreed on that, my friend," Oli told Ave. "Like I said, she's desperate. The arm is bait. A lure."

It didn't matter, from the looks of it.

"The walls are closing in," Paco said, voice faint and airy. "They're crushing us now; we couldn't even see them. We were dead so long ago. We've been dead this whole time."

Ciro couldn't move in two directions at once.

"We're not dead yet," Gonchi said.

"*No one* has to *die*," Felipe defended. "The room's more open now than it's been this whole time. We have plenty of air to breathe."

- Let's finish this.

The Narrator

Your eyes dart to the corners of the room. You don't see her.

Voice of the Hero

Where is she?

- [Close the door behind you.]

The Narrator

You close the door behind you. Almost magically, its locks immediately click into place. Maybe they'll open if you finish the job.

“Scoundrel,” Felipe cursed, sounding the most stressed Ciro had heard him yet. “We can’t approach her like this; in her scared, wounded heart, she’ll surely view us as a threat.”

“I’d view you as a threat,” Winnie muttered.

“Was approaching her seriously *on the table* in your mind?!” Paco cried out.

“Killing us,” Ave said, faint, barely there. “Killing us again.”

- [Investigate the arm.]
- "Come on out. Let's just get this over with."
- "I'll wait."

“She’s lost a limb and is actively bleeding out,” Oli noted.

“Indeed right you are, snake. Have patience, my friends. We only need weather this storm of the heart, and our nonaggression will show her the depths of our benevolence,” Felipe declared.

The Beast chuffed.

- "Come on out. Let's just get this over with."

I can wait. I'm very patient.

- [Wait.]
- [Venture into the shadows.]

“As are we,” Felipe argued. “You’ll realize soon enough you have no reason to hide.”

- [Wait.]

The Narrator

You do your best to patiently wait her out.

But eventually, exhaustion starts to set in.

Voice of the Hero

Come on, wake up! We can't fall asleep down here!

“What the fuck.” *Ciro* blurted out. No *wonder* *Quiet* didn't sleep well by themselves! “Again?!”

“If you were already awake why couldn't *you* keep guard?” *Paco* snapped at *Nando*.

Nando put his palms out and up in self-defense. “That's not how it worked. We tired together, we died together.”

- [Keep waiting.]
- [Venture into the shadows.]
- [Keep waiting.]

The Narrator

You wait for as long as you can, pushing yourself to stay awake and stay vigilant, but you can't outwait someone's who's been waiting for as long as she remembers.

You barely even realize that you've started to drift off.

“The fuck is that bullshit? Why do we only fall asleep when she can brutally murder us?” *Ciro* shouted. “That's a sick joke.”

“Why do you assume—?” *Borja* and *Felipe* started to ask at the same time.

“—you're in any position deserving of rest?”

“—every conflict with her will end in death?”

The Narrator

Pain tears you from your sleep. The Princess is upon you, ripping into your flesh, unnaturally sharp teeth and claws severing arteries and digging into organs.

There's nothing to be done. You're already half-gone.

Ciro didn't even have to answer. The game did all the talking he needed.

Above *Quiet*, hunched over them really, was the Princess. Human only in form and by technicality, her nails so sharp her hands ended more in talons than in fingers, and teeth bared like an animal preparing to snap its prey's neck in its jaws.

She came onto them like an animal, like a starving thing, hands posed to rip and snap and tear through their torso; to disembowel them alive, and to scoop their writhing guts up into her waiting maw.

He could appreciate, for Dami's sake at least, that there was no visible gore on screen despite the narration. He could only imagine how it felt.

Quiet didn't even flinch.

(Perspective) Compared to everything else, this is nothing.

"That," *Ciro* spat. Glaring at the two who dared thought to question his rage. "That is why."

Voice of the Hero

It can't just end like this, right?

The Narrator

As much as I'd prefer for things to have gone differently, I can't deny the reality of what's happened. I'm sorry, but it's over.

Everything goes dark, and you die.

The screen went dark. *Ave* finally managed to tear his attention away from it, shivering all over. *Ciro* pulled him in, holding him steady even as his world fell apart all over again.

(Remorse) A wasted life.

(Reassurance) You did your best.

"A good meal," *Beast* declared. "But more satisfying to run for seconds."

"The important thing is," *Felipe* turned around in his seat to address the room, "we did not fight back."

Ciro sat stock still, something in his chest feeling tight, blistering in its expansion. His skin was too small for his body, yet at the same time, he felt feather-light. Like a breeze could carry him away.

Something in him— *Score* and *Rage* and *Rebellion* and *Survival* and *Instinct* and— and *Empathy*, deep down— clenched—

"WHAT IS **WRONG** WITH YOU?!"

—and exploded— scattered light and reflection shattered, blown away like debris— enveloped in ***Drive***.

The wind roared its agreement around him. His throat felt torn apart, bleeding. What was with this damned place that managed to sap every kind of empathy from its inhabitants?!

"Are you daft? Are you *blind*? Do you not see what has happened to us, can you not foresee what will happen next?" *Ciro* rose to stand. No one stopped him. No one could stop him.

"What delusions spin their way around your mind?! Why would we *ever* want to come even

close to reunion with someone like this again? Every chance given is another life taken. We're so far *beyond* 'seconds' now. How much will you have us give before you realize you're pushing us nowhere but the same abyss we've paid a couple dozen visits to over again?"

The only question in his mind was why not even one of them had suggested they excised Felipe much earlier. Like removing a necrotic limb. Two.

Something pulsed in his chest. Ripped and teared. Screamed in every fiber of his being, in muscle and in thread, and in several dozen fibers which were not his own, not of him. And still he stood drenched deep within it all, the dirt and the mud and the sinew, hands dirty with the blood he had yet to spill.

He enveloped this space. Enveloped those within it; felt so many hearts beating as one. An equal collective awaiting their judgement. Pulled these ones together, ripped those ones apart. *Us* and *Them*. He made it *his*.

Feather weighed against heart. The scales tipped; tipped by his favor. For one blistering, blissful moment, the world was rendered no less and no more than *his* decision.

When everything was over, he would blow the house down *with them inside*.

Chapter End Notes

Dua: Another year, another chapter! Things progress and change as they always do, action and reaction and fluff and angst. Balanced as well as we can make it. We do hope you enjoy what is to come!

overthink_it: The grind only steps when we do. Cheers to the new year.

Chapter 22: Qué fácil ser moralista, qué difícil tener moral

Chapter Summary

Everything that is, and everything that isn't, must run on the mathematical construct of the circle. Calligraphy ink swirls its shapes and penned words by the rounded waves of its contour. Even the mighty cyclones turn and swirl and spin in its shape. The preyed upon run in circles, the conversational and the literal, until all ends meet and are reborn anew.

The cycle of life and death: a sweet and endless pattern, if you listen to the bard's reverie and the priest's sermon. Those with ways of words, though words cannot bind meaning from that which was here before the first language.

Chapter Notes

Was told the names were confusing if they were at the end so here they are, at the beginning!

Broken - Borja
Stubborn - Gonzalo/Gonchi
Cold - Caín
Contrarian - Connie
Hunted - Avellano/Ave
Opportunist - Oleander/Oli
Paranoid - Paco
Cheated - Ciro
Hero - Fernando/Nando
Smitten - Felipe
Skeptic - Harrier/Harri
Prisoner - Tabi/Tabitha
Damsel - Dami/Damiana
Witch - Winnie
Tower - Thelka
Adversary - Ava
Nightmare - Clara
Spectre - Rocío
Stranger - Plethora

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Felipe was blown back from the force of Ciro's explosion. He rose from the chair of the Decider, away from this household's laptop, though didn't get far at all before the mountain that was Gonzalo blocked his path. Despite his best efforts, it seemed, Felipe didn't always get to be the center of attention. That was funny.

Instead, blood was drooling from the corner of Ciro's mouth.

It was, in Tabi's opinion, the most bewildering repeated incident of him and the others in his group. This time, he didn't look like he planned to let himself be silenced.

He was sharp edges and shimmering light. There were no windows or doors opened here, yet a draft still billowed in from an unseen place and whipped in a violent whirlwind around him. He reached up with a single hand to wipe the red from his chin, clearing his throat with an unsettling low gurgle, and took a hissing breath like a fuse running out.

"Actions have consequences. Not just for us, but for *her*, too. You want us to let her walk all over us, just let her get away with *everything* because in your twisted little mind it'd be wrong of us to return even half the damage she dishes out. She can hurt us, and that's just *forgiven* with nothing to earn it, but the second *we* fight back suddenly *we're* the bad guys? That's bullshit, complete fucking bullshit, unfair double-fucking-standard."

"Life is often unfair, just as love is often convoluted," Felipe argued through the hurricane.

He moved forward towards the eye of the storm, stumbling as Ciro stepped back and the winds buffeted him harder. Ciro argued back, "just because unfair things *happen* doesn't mean you should blindly accept them. That's defeatism. That's bullshit."

"And this tantrum is hurting you worse," Borja commented. "A game on a screen can't hurt you. You're doing this to yourself. Just to futilely reject a tangible truth."

"Weren't you paying attention to what he said, what he took from this?!" Ciro spat, red dripping onto the carpet beneath him. He wasn't paying it any mind. "There are lessons you can learn from games, right and wrong."

"And he's right," Borja nodded.

Gonzalo grabbed Felipe's arm, incidentally stabilizing him even if the intent was clearly to protect Ciro's personal space. Felipe rested his hand where Gonchi held him, leaning into that restraint for support. He retorted, "you cannot lash out and push the world away the second it hurts you — to be hurt is to be vulnerable. There is no love where you refuse to put your heart on the line!"

"There is no 'love' in *pain*!" Ciro's voice choked past its wounds. His frantic movements were slowing down. His volume raised to compensate. "The whole *point* of the idea of vulnerability is trusting someone not to take advantage of it, not that it *will* be taken advantage of. Letting yourself die for someone else's sake is *suicide*."

Tabitha glanced over to Damiana. Entranced as she was by this display, her sister took greater priority. She was never fond of yelling. The boys, as Plethora recommended, could handle themselves.

Tabi held her hand lightly, stroking the back of her hand with her thumb. “Do you want to go somewhere else for this part?”

Dami shook her head softly. “I’ll be okay.”

“You can be okay somewhere else,” Harri murmured at her side, “there’s no reason you have to watch this, or anything else for that matter. It’s not your responsibility.”

Dami glanced away. “*He* might need to take a breather. This is a lot of big feelings.”

Tabi did agree, though as insightful and observant as her sister could be... “Now isn’t the time to be worrying about other people.”

Dami picked at the skin on her arm, avoiding Tabi’s gaze.

“You can take a breather together,” Harrier suggested instead. “We’ll need it.”

Tabi picked it up. “And we usually take a snack break between Chapters anyway.”

“And *yours* are the best ones,” Oli chimed in, to Tabi’s annoyance.

“Don’t let Paco hear that,” Dami said.

“Ave’s the one with the sharp ears, Paco just sees too much,” Oli dismissed with a wave of his hand.

There was a faint, faint trace of a smile on her face. The real one; not the kind she wore as a mask, the kind Tabi knew from her in their first few weeks together. The adjustment period from their captivity to their new lives had been disorientating, to say the least. Navigating what few of each other’s quirks were exposed and learned in those first few months was... an added challenge.

In truth, Tabi did not know what *happened* to Dami on occasion; but she understood, at least in part, why it started and how she could make it stop. She’d never seen or let Dami get distressed beyond the... symptoms’ beginning stages. Why would she? All she knew was that, sometimes, Dami got *stuck* — and when she was *stuck*, she was... pliable. A little too open to suggestion, a little overeager to please. A little less herself; a little more... what she thought others wanted her to be.

Subservient. Grateful. Happy. Perfect, inhumanly so. Without ambition or a will of her own; unobtrusive. With the looks to match. As though she were decor and not person.

All Tabi knew was that there wasn’t anything *wrong* with her. Dami just needed to be reminded of that sometimes. She just needed a little help getting out of her own head. She just needed to know it was safe to be herself.

Oli continued to speak as Tabi thought. “I’m sure the others won’t mind the break as long as they get something else in return. No one gets mad when someone else bakes cookies for them. It’s like a built-in excuse.”

“Are you going to make anything?” Dami asked.

Oli hesitated. “I think I might be banned from host duties after the last two times.”

Tabi glanced to where Gonchi was holding Felipe in place. She wanted Dami out of here in case things got... violent, again. But she didn’t want her sister alone or isolated. In case of a *certain someone*.

“And if I’m not,” Oli stretched noncommittally, “better to lay low and keep the heat off me for a while. I’m sure they’ll forget about the other stuff eventually; it’s not *that* important.”

They’ll forget about you drugging them? Tabi raised an eyebrow at him, then shook her head nonverbally.

“Ciro will wind down in a moment,” Harri explained, “and after, I can send him back in the kitchen with you.”

“He looks like he’ll need some freshening up, anyway,” Tabi remarked. She glanced over to Quiet. Nose bleeds were explainable in cold weather, but if Quiet started coughing up *blood* to mirror Ciro the way they had before...

He *was* swallowing pretty thickly, incidentally following Oli’s advice. It wasn’t hard to lay low when others were so attention-grabbing. No one was really looking in their direction. Or, Tabi noticed, to Ave and Paco huddled together a short ways away, closer to the walls.

Tabi’s eyes wandered back to Quiet, huddled between Nando and Connie like they were. Inconspicuous. It was such a natural position for each of them. If she *really* looked, she’d earnestly pay faster attention to how *Connie* still looked partially shaken by—

No, wait. Tabi squinted. *There’s something behind them.*

A chill ran up Tabi’s arms, sudden goosebumps on her skin. Oh; so *that* was where the cold little freak was. With the commotion in the middle of the room and the seats lined and the couch so packed-full, she hadn’t even noticed the figure standing *behind* everyone else.

She barely even noticed him. Had anyone else?

Cain didn’t pay her stare any mind, watching the fight between Ciro and Felipe intently. Tabi wasn’t sure why she felt like she’d *caught* him. He was just... standing there. Doing nothing. Frankly, it was the most well-behaved he’d ever been as far as she’d seen him.

Still, she brushed shoulders with Harri to catch his attention, nodding in Cain’s direction.

“You didn’t see him?” Harri asked, adjusting his glasses. “Yeah. He just does that. For him to just be people-watching is better than the alternative. Means he’s not bored.”

Cain looked back at Harri, giving him a polite wave and turning back to the commotion.

Felipe's hair, usually kept so prim and proper, combed-through and soft and styled, was windswept. He glared through the tangled strands, his perfect image defiled by the winds.

He mouthed words, but all that fell from him was whistling silence.

The air would not grant him his breath.

Ciro stomped his feet. The floor beneath him rattled. "No. No! Just shut up! Shut the fuck up!"

The wind picked up. Felipe fell back into Gonchi's arms, unable to withstand the force. Caught by the undersides of his arms, his knees bent as his head ducked, shielding his eyes from the dry air.

Ciro put his foot down. Slammed it. "Here's how this is going to go," he started, his voice suddenly clear. The winds slowed. The floor beneath him shuddered. Felipe's legs laid limp below him. "You had your turn to speak. You're done. You're finished. Everything that falls from your mouth is more of the same bullshit you love to spew. So instead of running and hearing this same shit over and over and *over again...*"

The winds stopped. They gave him Ciro's next breath, and held out on all the rest. He raised his eyes, up above Felipe, to Gonchi behind him. Everything sharpened.

"We're doing *something else*."

The world skipped like a record.

Tabi's position hadn't altered, but the rest of the room's had. Felipe was sat on the floor like a bad dog, cross-legged with his hands folded in his lap. Gonchi hadn't been moved, but the chair had swiveled around as if to welcome him. And as if, Tabi blinked rapidly, the room had spun around with it.

It was... mildly disorientating.

Felipe startled, his head flinching back up. "What just—?"

Silence — argument ended in a flash, as if everything there was to say had been heard a million times before and wasn't worth even the second repetition.

Dami rose, uncertain, and Ciro looked at her immediately. Tabi wouldn't grace Felipe's expression as she whisked Ciro away into another room with a description.

At the position both were at, Gonchi needed not do much. All he did was take a step forward, interrupting both Felipe's line of sight and his path forward. It was impressive, the angle Felipe had to crane his neck at to meet his eyes. That impression made was one of a silent threat.

“I don’t think the others pay enough attention to notice half the time he’s present,” Harri continued, still paying mind to Cain. “I could ask him and he’d probably know down to the number how many times someone’s gotten startled just ‘cause they didn’t know he was there. He’s... good at being subtle.”

Tabi nodded along. Harri quieted down, and she leaned in closer to him in the mutual silence. It was an unspoken comfort. The pause in time, the wait for development. This was a better place to sit and think than cold stone flooring.

Idly, she wondered if the name **the Beast**, like the chapter, had been chosen at random or by some kind of precognition. They could have just as well called her the Chimera. Every name had meaning.

Her fingers traced Harri’s curl patterns, where hair met nape—his head moved away minimally, quickly. Ticklish, maybe?

He had been ‘Skeptic.’ She wasn’t sure if the others knew her name; wasn’t sure if they’d initially known Dami as “the Damsel,” too, or if that was an addition from the game itself. Coincidence was a convenient and comfortable excuse for some things, but seeing what she had, Tabi had doubts the correlation between the Beast’s placeholder title and this Chapter title was to be wholly dismissed. Thoughts, Tabi’s in particular as much as she loathed to confront the facts, had proven to be malleable to outside influence on more than one occasion.

She was skeptical of the whole arrangement. It wasn’t an unwelcome feeling in the slightest. It was the most natural thing in the world, to doubt. To doubt was to anchor herself to the certain. It was what held her in place even in a castle of change, observant to its shifting spaces and its dynamics over time.

The unnatural stagnancy and sanding off of the people she could now compare and contrast with their past selves: that, she could observe, now that she wasn’t among their numbers.

She could even see how it had gotten her. In the years sitting side-by-side, she could only watch. Her body had become wholly unreal. It couldn’t feel cold, or hunger, or hurt, which was all good with her, for there was no way to escape the basement except to wait and nothing to escape to. And something of that same line of thought had been planted inside her, becoming part of her, changing her, until she truly believed it. Until she had given up. Until the fundamental truth awoke in her: the system which shackled her was the system she was a part of, a part of it being her. She could not leave the castle.

Almost.

Of course, she had seen outside it and its walls. There was more to life than letting the world move around her, especially now that she was a part of that world. She had more to *be* than just a pair of eyes.

She never really paid attention to how cold she was until she was touching something warm. The contrast made both temperatures readily apparent. In this case, that something was Harri, shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand.

Just like that, she was back in that room, occupying a space. Not just that, but sharing personal space.

He leaned over to murmur to her in secret. "I'm more familiar with your position on Cain, now."

That got her attention.

"Not because he's done anything wrong," he clarified immediately, much to her disappointment. "Though I'm wary of that as a possibility. I've just seen him act from an outsider's perspective for the first time."

Tabi leaned back to get a better look at Harrier's face. She needed a good angle to study his facial expressions from. Conversations were spoken in two languages at once, and she wouldn't be missing a single hint from him, conscious or otherwise. "Enough with the preamble. What did he do?"

"He stopped Felipe," Harri simplified. "Borja and him had a plan for the next time Quiet visited. Their choice or not, there was a trap waiting for them, dual-folded, with contingencies. Borja as an emotional bait and snare with the welcoming embrace, and Felipe as a ticking time bomb prepared to be set off the moment Quiet refused to conform to Borja's indoctrination plan. Face and heel."

He shut up as he watched Quiet rise up and slink to the kitchen, undetected. Connie leaned in to ask Nando something or other, and he nodded.

"The intervention he made was invaluable. It was a necessary protective measure," Harri defended prematurely. As if he'd trained himself to do so. "Oleander could get Quiet to step out from the snare, but Cain was the only one of us equipped to efficiently handle the fallout. And that was a crisis which demanded efficiency."

"I didn't ask for excuses," Tabi cut him off. "I asked what he did to make you change your mind."

"That's the thing. I don't know," Harri deflected. He knew her better than that, to think she'd accept that answer. "He hasn't substantially changed as far as I can see; it's all in-character for him. I just... don't know his intentions."

It bothered Tabi that he only just now came to that conclusion. Was his namesake lost to him? "You still haven't answered the question."

"It's the outside perspective. *Seeing* it done to someone else... his posture, the pose he put them both in, his..." Harri paused as if he needed to recall the image to fully dissect it; as if he needed time to process it. "Whatever he took from Quiet, he pressed something in its place. Disappointment."

Oli winced, stealing Tabitha's attention. She snapped, "are you *spying* on us?"

“I’m gathering pertinent information,” Oli said, using different words but confirming Tabi’s accusation nonetheless. “Anyway, since you’ve gotten me involved—”

“We haven’t.”

“—I ought to throw my hat in the ring: not naming names, but a certain someone here has had a couple run-ins with an impression like that, and he didn’t take it well. Disappointing someone important, well, it’s hard to recover from. It hits you hard deep down in your chest.” Oli wrung his hands together, wincing again as he stretched out his back. “The kind of thing you’d do anything to avoid.”

“Quiet at least had reason to be disappointed in you,” Harri shrugged him off, uncaring for Oleander’s eavesdropping or the way his eyes widened then narrowed. “Cain, though... it makes *no sense* for the situation we were in.”

“Is it a seed?” Tabi considered, envisioning an idea planted into their subconscious, left to germinate and bare fruit in the future. “It’s not a given that it had to be rational to the present moment. Maybe his intentions include something long-term.”

Harri’s lips pressed into a thin line. He went quiet; mulling it over in his head.

She’d leave him to it. To her, there was no guarantee he acted any different with Harri. But neither possibility was without its troubling implications.

Quiet returned from the kitchen soon after. The Beast’s nostrils expanded as she caught the scent of the sweet treat in his hands, turning to watch him indiscreetly. He walked briskly over to where Harri and Tabi were sat, giving them a cookie each. “Dami insists,” he said by way of explanation, still carrying three.

“Of course she does,” Tabi answered with a smile, taking both and handing one off to Harri. They were warm; fresh, then. They must’ve gotten first pick.

They turned back to their seat, startling slightly. Harri nodded like he’d been waiting for it, though his frown didn’t lift as the pattern played out. They recovered, nodding to Cain casually and continuing on like nothing was wrong.

One cookie for Nando; one cookie for Connie.

Quiet paused, glancing up. Then tossed the final remaining cookie to Cain behind them both. He caught it as they spun back around, settling into their seat.

Nando blinked. “Why—?”

“A reward,” Quiet explained. “For good behavior.”

Nando glanced back at Cain. Connie, not seeming to want to pay him any mind, immediately split his cookie and offered Quiet half. They shook their hand. Connie pressed the half cookie into their hands, insisting.

Suddenly joined by another half; the equivalent to a full cookie in their hands. Nando looked them in the eye. “You deserve it.”

Quiet did not look like they knew how to respond to that, glancing back to Connie who was nodding vigorously in agreement.

Something like mist ghosted over their hands. Idly, they pressed the two halves together — from two separate cookies, not linking together quite right at their mismatched edges, but equivalent nonetheless. They bit into it. The pair on their either side tapped their half-cookies together in a gesture of cheers, eating their own happily.

“Wow,” Oli commented. “What a heartwarming display of generosity. It really makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

Tabi pretended he wasn’t talking.

She took a bite. Red velvet; warm and rich, possibly a touch too sweet as a flavor for her taste. She had helped Dami make them once and had no earthly idea how she could do it in so little time now. She’d been forced to accept culinary miracles.

Oli leaned in towards Harri. “I know it makes *me* think. ‘How can *I* emulate that? Is there anyone in my immediate vicinity who might appreciate half of *my* cookie?’ In the metaphorical sense, I mean. I don’t, personally, myself, have a cookie. If I did, it would be awfully easy to take that lesson to heart...”

“The rest of the batch will be out in a minute,” Harri said, swatting Oli away. “Cool your jets.”

And that it was. Out from the kitchen, Dami announced she was finished; Ava shot up at once, half-running into the kitchen.

Ciro walked out of the kitchen first, carrying nothing, but looking freshly put together, climbing over the couch instead of walking around — and having to pass by the Beast as he did, Tabi understood — and sitting right back down beside Winnie, not far from Ave or Paco either.

It was odd. Paco’s lips were moving, and if Tabi strained her hearing, she could almost catch the tell-tale sounds of whispering. Yet she couldn’t make out whatever it was he was saying, despite the fact that there was no ambient chatter to cover it up. Whatever he was saying to Ave, it had to be quiet, and it had to be private. Ciro stared after them with no small amount of concern.

The Beast yawned. What big teeth she had.

He scooted barely-closer to them, patting the empty space next to him; a gesture of invitation back to Winnie. She flattened her ears. And obliged.

Dami and Ava walked out as one, Ava holding a suspiciously clean mixing spoon as if she were brandishing a weapon, and Dami carrying out a simple snack tray. Those two *did* walk

around the couch, though Dami held the tray higher as she passed the Beast — a known thief — and Ava stuck close to her side, baring her teeth to Felipe yet smiling at Gonchi.

Tabi had been reeling from first seeing the game when she first met Gonchi. She had been preoccupied in the moment with the concept of vessels and Princesses, and the way the Entity talked about them: as if they were no different at all, completely interchangeable in their function and service.

It was her sister who had forced her to grit her teeth, swallow her opinions and look kindly on that strange and violent man before she'd glimpsed the good in him. She remembered how long it had taken her to find it, how little Ava had told her it took her to love him.

Tabitha hadn't seen that, at first. Now, watching him stop Felipe in his tracks, she gave him a silent apology, half-eager.

Ciro had made a storm start indoors. What could *Gonchi* do?

"I think it's time I take a turn," Gonchi announced, pulling Felipe down to sit on the floor beside the chair of the decider. "I'm surprised you forgot so quickly. It's *better* if you fight back."

"A sharp reversal in attitude," Plethora commented, their pairs of eyes on the sides of their head looking at neither Gonchi nor the game, but back at Quiet instead.

The Narrator

You're on a path in the woods. And at the end of that path is a cabin. And in the basement of that cabin is a princess.

You're here to slay her. If you don't, it will be the end of the world.

- (Explore) I'm getting a terrible sense of déjà vu.
- (Explore) Wait... hasn't this already happened?
- (Explore) But I died! What am I doing here?
- (Explore) She's going to kill me again!
- [Silently proceed to the cabin.]
- [Turn around and leave.]

- [Silently proceed to the cabin.]

"*Very* sharp turn," Plethora amended. "You're far less interested in playing your role."

"There's nothing important to do there, it's just wasting time and energy," Gonchi responded.

"Every step of your journey matters," Plethora said. "Even the ones you don't take. Especially them."

"I'm not getting pulled into a debate."

Harri folded his arms in a silent fuss. Tabi was inclined to agree with his wordless disapproval. She hated to admit it, but Felipe's... roleplay... had been useful in refreshing the group on old information.

Quiet huffed. "If only it were that easy to keep you all settled down."

"It could be," Cain said to the back of their head. His cookie was gone. Vanished out of sight.

Connie snorted into his hand, slowly, noticeably, throwing an arm around Quiet. "Aw, c'mon, give into the chaos! You know you can't get enough of us!"

He stared, expectant, as Quiet spent three seconds deliberating the response. They reciprocated with a full half-hug, squeezing. "Yeah, I do."

Tabi's eyes noticed where their other hand was anchored by. Which did not surprise her in the slightest. She had eyes.

The Narrator

A warning, before you go any further...

She will lie, she will cheat, and she will do everything in her power to stop you from slaying her. Don't believe a word she says.

Voice of the Hunted

Does a cat lie to a cornered mouse when it plays with its freedom, or is it just acting out its nature?

There was a half second for that line to sink into the room before Tabi could *feel* the itch in the air. An itch only pointless debate between countless voiceless could scratch.

"Cats can feint," Nando started. "Is that the same thing?"

"Most things can faint," Cain said listlessly.

"We're talking about cats though," Tabi said, chucking Cain's comment directly in the bin.

"Well, in *my* experience," Oli started—

Tabi continued her train of thought, running him over. "And: no. Feints have a purpose, play doesn't."

Connie rose in his seat at once. He sounded mortally offended. "Play has plenty of purpose! Everyone learns by playing—"

"*Not* what I meant." Tabi rolled her eyes.

"It's what you *said*," Connie argued.

“It’s cruel,” Clara said. “Offering someone a chance at freedom and snatching it away from them; teasing them with it. How can you blame them, really, for snapping afterwards?”

“You’d know,” Quiet snapped.

“I *would*, wouldn’t I?” Clara said, a sweet smile in her tone. “I’m so glad you were paying attention to my side of things. I don’t think either of us would blame a mouse for striking out against a cat in that situation. I’d say the cat *deserved it*, even.”

“Cruelty is cruelty,” Ciro defended, sitting up to hide Paco from view.

“It doesn’t make you any better of a person,” Winnie agreed. “It just makes you just as hideous as the wretch you’re killing. Sometimes worse.”

“You can’t tell me it’s not fun, though!” Razor crowed.

“The two things aren’t really comparable either. A feint is a strategic maneuver, it has a clear time and place in a fight with a specific goal,” Gonchi said, then seemed to catch himself.

“No, no, we’re not doing this—”

He clicked the mouse, effectively shutting everyone up.

Voice of the Hero

I don't see why that matters. A lie is a lie, and if anything, she's the one who's cornered.

Voice of the Hunted

She could have gotten out of there whenever she wanted to. We should trust nothing that she tells us, only what we hear and smell.

For a single moment, before it started again.

“It wasn’t that easy!” Tabi said. If that *were* the case, she certainly would’ve at *least* slipped the shackles on her wrists sometime in the first millennium.

Winnie shrugged noncommittally. “Eh, agree to disagree.”

Tabi glared at her. She smirked a little, not unlike the self-satisfied expression ‘she’d’ made on the screen as the cuff to her shackle gingerly slid off her wrist like an oversized bracelet.

“That’s pretty sound advice,” Harri said, changing the topic. “Not the way I’d say it, but he’s not wrong. Observation is the best skill we have at our disposal.”

Tabi held her tongue about the results his ‘observation’ got him with her. Now wasn’t the time.

The Narrator

That's a very roundabout way of saying that you should listen to me and take this seriously.

Voice of the Hunted

Maybe.

“Look at you, not giving an actual answer!” Oli grinned. “That’s a good way to go with Him.”

Ave ducked lower in his seat, scooting partially behind Ciro, not seeming to appreciate the increase in attention.

- [Proceed into the cabin.]

The Narrator

The interior of the cabin is ruinous and dilapidated. It feels like no one has lived here for a long time, wind rushing in through cracks and holes in the wooden walls. The only furniture of note is a termite-eaten table with a pristine blade perched on its edge.

“What is this?” Ava complained. “This isn’t a cabin, it’s a bunch of wooden planks stuck together.”

Beast shook her pelt clear. “It wasn’t made with me in mind.”

“It’s very...” Oli struggled for a word. “Open. Eco-friendly.”

“Eco-friendly?” Connie repeated, a slight laugh in his tone.

“Yes!” Oli defended. “It’s biodegradable, look at it. Practically degrading right now. You can see the weeds poking through the floorboards already, valiant little things that they are.”

“I didn’t know you knew that word,” Harri commented.

“I read.”

“It’s not just weeds, that’s a whole shrub at the right, there,” Ava pointed at the screen.

“It doesn’t look structurally sound at all,” Harri noted, no-doubt paying attention to the ‘windows’ at the left and right of the room, more like gaps where the wooden paneling slipped and fell apart, the frame around where the original cabin’s windows barely held aloft. “The doorframe’s leaning. The door itself is missing, too; I wonder why that is.”

And so the notes were to be compiled.

The Narrator

The blade is your implement. You’ll need it if you want to do this right.

- (Explore) You didn’t say anything about the mirror on the wall.
- (Explore) This whole cabin is different than last time.
- (Explore) [Approach the mirror.]

- (Explore) [Take the blade.]
- [Enter the basement.]
- (Explore) [Take the blade.]

The Narrator

You take the blade from the table. It would be difficult to slay the Princess and save the world without a weapon.

Advice swiftly taken, it seemed.

Gonzalo did not waste time moving through the options menu. In comparison to the deciders of the past, he seemed to know what he wanted before the options were presented to him, combing through the list in swift motion to find what he wanted most — and selected it, quickly, before anyone else had a chance to make their own suggestions.

- [Enter the basement.]

Stubborn indeed.

She would admire his dedication if not for— “what about the mirror?”

“Screw the mirror,” Gonchi told her. “It’s done nothing for us.”

The Narrator

The door to the basement creaks open, revealing what's left of an old, wooden staircase. It's still sturdy enough that you can make your way down in one piece, though you'll have to be mindful of holes.

The air seeping up from below is oddly warm and wet, as if you're descending into a jungle. If the Princess lives here, slaying her would probably be doing her a favor.

She growls up the stairs.

I can smell you.

“Oh, come on,” Oli complained. “Like it’s hard?”

Gonchi paused.

Harri closed his notebook.

Ave lifted his head from where he’d hidden himself away in his flock, inquisitive.

Oli fidgeted in his seat. Speechless for once.

Connie smiled. “Care to elaborate...?”

Oli, apparently, didn’t.

Why did *Winnie* look nervous?

Voice of the Hero

She sounds almost... feral.

Voice of the Hunted

Impatient. Or maybe eager.

"Of course she's eager to see us," Felipe spoke up from the floor. Gonchi's fist clenched around the computer mouse, but Felipe apparently paid the silent threat no mind. "We're here to make amends after we were cruelly forced to tatter our fleeting bonds and sully our good word with violence."

"You need to know who you're talking to before strategizing how to appease them," Oli advised, "but you're going about it the entirely wrong way."

The Narrator

You carefully make your way down the stairs.

The last step gives way to the damp earth floor of a starlit pit. The walls are obscured by an impenetrable darkness, giving the illusion that the room might stretch on forever. You brush against the wide leaves of plants that surround you on all sides, seemingly the only living things that occupy this strange underground wilderness.

Tabi couldn't grasp what it was she was seeing. Had the stairs sent them into a completely different reality? The amount of vegetation present on the screen wasn't correlated at all to the minimal light offered by the barred basement window — which itself was not a window, really. It was more of a *skylight*, embedded into the ceiling somehow, if the angle of it was any indication.

Why and how was the basement so overgrown? Why even call it a cabin, if it was functionally identical to just... *more woods*? Sure, Ava's 'cabin' had looked something more like a cave on the inside — and Winnie's had looked more like a hovel, embedded in dirt and root — but this was pushing past Tabi's limit for absurdity.

It didn't make sense. It didn't align, the space of the jungle and the space the cabin occupied, foliage reaching up to the sky in an impossible room. These weren't even the same types of plants that grew on the path in the woods. (When had she become familiar enough with the typical woods to make that assertion so confidently?)

"Your tails look similar," Connie pointed out between the Beast and Winnie.

"Is that *really* what you're thinking about right now?" Tabi asked, unable to stop herself.

"Why wouldn't I?" Connie shrugged. "It's not like we have a whole lot else to look at. And tails are cool."

“What is that supposed to mean?” Winnie balked.

“Tails *are* cool,” Ava agreed. “You should grow one.”

Connie looked truly despondent, tucking his scarf around his neck. “I know, I’ve been trying.”

“They’re nuisances if you ask me,” Winnie opined.

“Can I have it?” Connie asked. “If you’re not using it?”

“That’s not how it works!”

Voice of the Hunted

The jungle is pressing in on us... hiding her from view. She could be anywhere.

The Narrator

You see only a flash of the Princess before she scurries away into the underbrush, dragging her heavy chain behind her.

“Pretty sure we just saw her dart to the left, actually,” Harri corrected, “no thanks for your help.”

“He was obviously looking higher.”

Gonchi moved the mouse towards where the options menu would be in apparent anticipation.

“Hold on there strong guy,” Oli called. “You’ve got a *lot* of ambition, and we can all appreciate that, but *maybe* hold off on running after her the moment she flashes a pretty little tail your way?”

“Pretty?!” Ava growled, fixing the chimera with a hard glare. She met Ava’s without heat, scratching her head.

“Pretty...?” Nando repeated, unsubtly turning to check Beast’s tail.

“I can see it,” Connie said. “Gonza’s got a type, no harm in it.”

“I have no interest in cubs, for now,” the chimera told the room, sniffing twice in the open air. “Though I do have interest in something to *eat*.”

“Oh! I’ve got you there!” Razor said, picking a line of cookies off the snack tray. Beast opened her mouth expectantly. Down the funnel they went. Did she even chew? Did she *taste* her food, eating it like that?

“She’s arrogant, she wasn’t in position, and we caught her off-guard,” Gonchi listed. “I don’t see your point here.”

“Like she would just *forget* to tuck her tail in, give me a break,” Oli scoffed. “She was waving it as she ran. That’s a *lure*. Like her arm was last time: a little something to get you going, to step into the darkness where she can maul you without issue.”

“Oh, like she *didn’t* do when we stayed put?” Gonchi retorted. Oli’s arguments died on his tongue.

Which meant, unfortunately, that Felipe had time to fill the dead air.

“Look at us. See how our vulnerability opens us up to communication? Exposed in the light, awaiting her. We are a sharp contrast to her hiding away in these dark corners, afraid to be seen,” he waxed poetic, staring up at the screen. He turned to Gonchi, and to Oli further back, a smile on his face. “You’re both right. She’s calling us to join her. And we need her to join *us*.”

The Narrator

Remember, she's just a Princess.

Voice of the Hero

She is certainly not just a Princess.

The Narrator

You’re not helping.

Voice of the Hunted

It doesn't matter what she is. It only matters what she does.

“Naturally.”

Even with his face half tucked in as he had it, Tabi could see Ave pinching his face in, like hearing Cain’s approval was no more sour than swallowing a lemon.

The Narrator

Her shining eyes appear between the leaves, staring hungrily at you from the darkness.

I can hear your heart pounding from the bottom of the stairs, fledgling. You're right to be terrified.

I'm so much more than you, and a little splinter clutched in trembling hands won't save you from me.

“It’s not ‘little,’” Gonchi said on reflex.

“Oh, I see the game we’re playing at here,” Oli said, settling into his seat. He nodded to the chimera tilting her head at him, a glint in his eye. “Takes one to know one, and I know a bluff

when I see it.”

“*Is she bluffing?*” Paco said. “Or is that overconfidence just the thing that will get us killed?”

“She wouldn't need to demean us if she was so sure.”

Tabi exchanged a glance with Harri. ‘*You’re right to be terrified,*’ ‘*I’m so much more than you,*’ ‘*little splinter,*’ ‘*save you from me*’ in place of admitting her own life was at risk. The logic was sound, but they’d tried calling her bluff before — whether Felipe meant it that way or not — hadn’t they? Why wouldn’t she just wait them out a second time?

The Narrator

A shiver rushes up your spine and pulls you upright.

Voice of the Hunted

The air's shifting. She's getting ready to pounce. Move, now.

Gonchi’s entire posture shifted. He leaned in. He scrolled through the options with tactical precision. There had to be more to the list (Tabitha caught something about chains), but she couldn’t catch it at the rate he—

- [Move.]

The Narrator

You lunge to the side, picking a direction on instinct. As you land you're buffeted by a gust of air disturbed by the sudden motion of a massive body—the Princess.

There was a sound, an unholy sound: halfway through scream and roar. Dissonant and loud. A horrid shrieking of an animal uncontained.

The screen was dark, but the Beast herself flashed across the screen — a lunge, but not towards the camera. Off in angle. Pale motion blur of bright white eyes and teeth in the dark, and out of view she vanished again.

Her battle cry (hunting cry?) still rang in Tabi’s ears, pulling her shoulders up and jerking her back against her will. Her breath hitched in a cut-off yelp.

It set her startle response off by sheer shock. *Dodge*, was all her body knew, *something loud, big, hungry*.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Dami flinch the same. She figured others did, too.

“Shit,” Nando wheezed, a slight shake to his hands. Ave’s limbs looked locked in place.

“Can you say that again?” Connie asked, laughing nervously at his own joke. “I couldn’t quite make it out.”

The Narrator

In an instant, she's pounced on the spot where you would have been, her chains rattling across the floor behind her.

Before you can blink, she's gone, vanishing once more into the shadows. But you still feel her gaze on you.

"Good call," Gonchi praised to the space behind him. He didn't sound shaken in the least.

"What elegance, do you see how swiftly her retreating form moves? What ever could have inspired a name like 'Beast' for a creature of majesty like this? I find it an appalling misnomer," Felipe raved. "With speed and precision, and her tail trailing behind her like a ribbon, she's a practiced dancer!"

"To dance you need a partner," Dami spoke up.

"And one isn't in the mood," Tabi drawled.

"Isn't he? He didn't even have to think to pick up on her cues," Felipe sighed. "In sync without even a word spoken between them."

Ave looked... shaken. If by the scare on the screen or Felipe's words, Tabitha couldn't blame him. Hunched down, hiding; frozen, like a scared bunny. Paco didn't look to be doing too well beside him, either. Frantic. Whispering.

"Don't listen to him, don't hear it," he was saying. He wasn't leaving himself room to breathe between his sentences, fragmented and twisting into each other as they were. "Getting in our heads. Twisting us around, confusing us. He's in on it. He'll feed us right to her if he has his way. Can't listen to him."

Ave shook his head. To who and what?

"You have to stop talking like that," Ciro snapped, at who Tabi didn't seem sure. Ciro looked even less certain.

"He's taking advantage of us, turning us against our best senses; against each other, next, I bet," Paco whispered, his voice a sharp hiss. He didn't seem capable of stopping. His eyes were open too wide; it pulled open his mouth, pulled open his lungs. His breath wasn't his own anymore. "We can't trust anything in this place. Not each other, not our senses, *certainly* not *them* not to kill us when our eyes are shut and our ears are blocked... We're completely trapped."

Ave's head stopped shaking. He stared past Paco's eyes, coiling.

"Stop talking." It sounded more like a plea than a demand; anger borne of fear, not any sort of strength. Ciro grabbed the pair by their shoulders and they both flinched out from his hands. He sat still before them.

“I must say, I am astounded with your transformation standing before us here today,” Felipe praised, deaf to what Paco was saying, turning to look at the chimera in her great, big, forward-facing eyes. She ducked her head low to stare at him. The menace did not connect. “Your confidence, to go from shrouding yourself in the shade of leaves, to stand before a crowd without a hint of your prior shyness... you’re even performing for us, with the guidance of the fair maiden beside you.”

“Guilty as charged!” Razor winked.

Ciro tensed at the sound of her voice. Beneath his breath: “just fucking *shut up*.”

You're faster than you were before. But you're still meek. Reactive. Prey.

The Narrator

You whirl around to find her, and your gaze meets hers, a pair of shining eyes peering out at you from just beyond the basement stairs.

Voice of the Hero

So she's cut off our escape. Shit. What do we do.

- (Explore) "What do you want?"
- (Explore) "We don't have to kill each other. What if I helped you? What if we left together? If you could get out of here on your own, wouldn't you have already left?"
- (Explore) "Stop hiding and show yourself."
- (Explore) "I was sent to kill you because you're a threat to the world. I'm starting to believe that's true."
- [Run for the stairs.]

“What are these options?! Quiet, you *know* talking to her won't help!” Gonchi complained. Then, before the ‘choicemaker’ could say anything: “nevermind, that can't be it. Whatever *this one* did must've messed things up.” He gestured to Felipe.

Maybe it was better that Quiet didn't get the chance to say anything. Tabitha had seen her sister make the same expression to guess the shape of the words to come.

- (Explore) "Stop hiding and show yourself."

If you want to see me, you should get better at seeing.

Harri opened up his notebook. Scribbled out the word “deflection.” The same word fell from Oli’s mouth.

“Deflection,” he called out like a spell. Like the words would be nullified if he acknowledged their purpose.

Then, scrawls about ecology — food webs, predation, adaptation — and a frustrated note about how none of that was *immediate*. The Beast didn’t seem patient for anything anymore,

let alone the generations an evolution like that would take: likely the point. She was taunting them with an impossibility combined with a dig at their ability.

“Funny,” Tabitha said. “I guess if she really hates speaking so much, she must have learned to communicate as much as possible in as few words as she could.”

All of it demeaning.

“Au contraire, she loves it,” Oli interrupted. “Unnecessary comments, unnecessary waste of breathing. Doesn't know when to shut up to hide her deflection. She gloats when the better play is to keep her secrets in her mouth.”

Voice of the Hunted

She knows that her strength lies in shadows and secrets. She won't reveal herself unless she has to.

“See?” Oli gestured to the screen, then glanced Ave's way. He hesitated for half a second before calling out to him, “you couldn't be more on the money, Avellano!”

“So let's make her reveal herself,” Gonchi said.

“A good plan,” Harri agreed. “Better than running around in circles forever.”

Ave flinched. It wasn't from the game.

“She's talking game but she refuses to play,” Gonchi continued. “This little ‘dance’ of hers, if that's what we want to call it, is cowardly and weak. We'd *see that* if we got her out of her comfort zone, stopped letting her stealth around and ambush us from the dark.”

“Hey now, I wouldn't say that's cowardly,” Oli interrupted, and did he ever run out of words to say?! “The right person makes ambushing an art by playing to their strengths. She's not even doing that!”

“We'll bait her out,” Gonchi assured. The plan looked ready to be put into practice. “I may not get to use this blade yet, but I can still be confrontational without it.”

- (Explore) "What do you want?"
- (Explore) "We don't have to kill each other. What if I helped you? What if we left together? If you could get out of here on your own, wouldn't you have already left?"
- (Explore) "I was sent to kill you because you're a threat to the world. I'm starting to believe that's true."
- (Explore) "You're deflecting."
- [Run for the stairs.]

- (Explore) "You're deflecting."

He clicked the option, making his choice. “We'll bite before we beg if I have anything to say about it.”

“Well said!” Connie cheered.

“To the both of you,” Harri clarified, looking at Quiet.

Oli preened. “A sharp tongue needs a sharper mind behind it.”

The Beast smiled. Tabi got the feeling she didn’t view their antics as celebration of true victory. She watched them cheer each other on like a cat stalked a waddle of ducklings as they played, idly picking out the one it’d snap up first.

And you bare your weakness to the world.

“The double-down defense, rare play,” Connie said.

“Because it doesn’t work,” Oli replied, almost with a laugh.

Tabi crossed her arms. “What's wrong with being honest?”

“Nothing!” Oli backpedaled. “Except if you're always honest, you open yourself up to manipulation from people who are less honest than you.”

“Like you?” She asked.

“*Nahhh*, you can trust *me*, ” Oli said. “If I were so shady, I wouldn’t be warning you, would I?”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Dami smiled. Tabi didn't know how to voice her objection to her sister taking advice from him in this situation.

Voice of the Hunted

She's coiling for another strike. Be somewhere else.

Voice of the Hero

We're on the back foot.

Voice of the Hunted

The back foot keeps us nimble. Keeps us alive.

Voice of the Hero

It doesn't matter if it keeps us alive if it eventually kills us. We need to take back the momentum. We need to do something.

How interesting, that both Avellano and Fernando looked equally uncomfortable with that exchange as each other.

“He's right,” they said in unison.

Ave moved first, poking his head up to see where Nando sat. Quiet met his eyes first. Nando stilled, glancing at them and then darting his eyes away. Oddly guilty body language.

He avoided repeated eye contact with Quiet as he looked at Ave. “You *are* keeping us alive,” he assured, then turned to Gonchi. “Better to listen to him for the time being. I’m just—overthinking, there. He can keep us running, more than... than, uh, I estimated.”

“If we keep running she kills us,” Ave simply put. “Our body has limits. She will find them.”

Nando looked like he had more to say, or more on his mind. But he kept it to himself, hands folded into his lap and staring pointedly at the floor to avoid anyone else’s eyes.

“We need to keep ourselves alive,” Gonchi simplified, “to make sure she’s *not*.”

Tabitha felt a small jolt. A sudden... epiphany.

He wanted to kill her.

It was obvious from the context leading up to this moment. She killed him beforehand. He took the knife. He had a motive and a weapon; a sharp, sharp blade given for just one purpose, no matter how many new ones they made.

He wanted to kill her.

She was a risk to his life. A risk to the world, in some detached way, though in no manner which was tangible to the stakes at hand. It was him, or it was her. And he wanted to kill *her*.

He wanted to kill her.

Tabitha... She felt no need to protest.

- (Explore) How exactly are we supposed to take back the momentum here?
- [Survive.]
- [Wait for her to strike, and hit her back.]
- [Play dead.]
- [Stand still.]

The cursor slowed its movements, finally letting Tabitha read, process, and understand the options. Even the two idiotic ones at the bottom.

Gonchi’s head twitched, almost turning back. “You’re the expert here.”

Ave twitched, but made no sound.

“Well,” Oli cast an appraising look, “*someone* finally realized what being the Decider means: listening to us little guys suggesting the choices.”

“There has to be time to clarify what Nando said,” Tabi offered. He seemed to tense worse.

“We think quickly,” Quiet offered. Tabi found that a bit hard to believe... “When we need to.”

That seemed to be the confirmation Gonchi needed.

- (Explore) How exactly are we supposed to take back the momentum here?

Voice of the Hero

We have the blade, I assume all she has are nails and teeth. Let's use our advantage.

Voice of the Hunted

The steel claw is small, and she is large. It's dangerous to fight back. It should only be a last resort.

“No no no no no,” Oli admonished. “You’re not thinking straight. Tiring her out— what if she tires *us* out? That’s the oldest trick in the book right there.”

“We won’t get tired,” Gonchi retorted. “Ave knows how to pace himself. He knows *her*, too. I’m not making the mistake of underestimating someone else’s opponent.”

Tabi wondered if they were about to witness firsthand just how Ave learned. The lesson he took to heart and would never be able to forget.

“What makes us so certain that she’s *large*?” Harri questioned. “Because she wants us to *think* she is?”

Razor gestured grandly to the chimera, as if that was an answer in itself.

“She wasn’t always like *that*,” Harri responded. He glanced back down to his notebook and said no more.

“If fighting back is a last resort then you’ll fight back *tired*, not at your best. That’s what she’s counting on.” Oli explained, voice lowering. He was facing Gonchi. So why did it feel like the words were directed somewhere else entirely? “It’s easy to see if you know where to look, and you were in no position to look. That was by design.”

“The Choicemaker has never lied about his options,” Winnie said. “For you to be so crafty with words and to miss a hint so obvious is foolish. The only choice worth taking here is survival; we’ll know through him when our ‘last resort’ is prompted.”

That... was a good observation, possibly. It wasn’t like the choices were absolute, though they tended to self-admit when the action itself was fallible.

- [Survive.]

The Narrator

You spring to a new patch of jungle, barely moving out of the way before the Princess surges past you with a speed that makes her practically unseen.

It wasn't any quieter the second time.

Clara... flinched. "Oh!" Her hand raised to her chest. "What a *rush*."

"All this running away is only making her chase you faster," Felipe said from the floor. Not to Gonchi. To the scared man on the couch, taking up so little space he almost looked boyish, eyes catching the dim light of the screen.

Ave tensed, curling in further. His ears flattened against his head.

Felipe smiled warmly, glancing between him and the chimera, tilting his head loftily back at Ave. "At some point prolonging the chase is futile, it's not even what she wants. Why would you deny her?"

"Because he doesn't want to die?" Ciro answered for him.

"You haven't even asked her intentions!" Felipe said, rising into a more active sitting position. "I'm sure if you asked, you'd be surprised at the answer she has waiting for you. If you took a chance and saw past her beastly appearance into the depths of her heart."

- (Explore) I don't think I can keep this up.
- (Explore) "What do you want?"
- (Explore) "We don't have to kill each other. What if I helped you? What if we left together? If you could get out of here on your own, wouldn't you have already left?"
- (Explore) "I was sent to kill you because you're a threat to the world. I'm starting to believe that's true."
- [Run for the stairs.]

"Don't start talking like that. We are *fine*," Gonchi insisted, tensing as if he wanted to jump out of the way himself.

Tabi had noticed something else. "She's not blocking the stairs anymore—"

"**No.**" Nando said.

"Bad idea. *Bad*," Ave said with him.

"Not my best moment," Quiet admitted.

Tabi was partially stunned by the reaction, wrong-footed. "Why? There's no lock, there's not even a *door*, and if you can lure her out of the basement..."

"Doors can appear after you walk through their thresholds," Paco warned.

"Not fast enough." Ave shuddered.

“I’m so much faster than you would ever believe,” the Beast rumbled, pleased with herself. “I don’t need to block an exit to react when a fledging stances its legs and spreads its wings.”

“Lure,” Oli and Winnie said together. Winnie shot a look at him before she continued, “that’s what she does. Cat and grouse.”

Connie scooted to the edge of his seat. “I thought you hated him, how come...?”

“Oh, we sure think alike, though,” Winnie started, then paused as a grimace overtook her features. She shook herself out of it, shouting to Gonchi, “you know, loverboy’s got a point. Ask her about herself, it might throw her off balance.”

- (Explore) "What do you want?"

I want to swallow you whole. And I will get what I want. You have no exit. You have no hope. You live and die by my whims and my whims alone.

The Narrator

Don't ask her what she wants. Just. Slay her.

Voice of the Hero

Is that all the advice you have? We don't even know what she looks like. Some specifics would be very helpful.

The Narrator

She's just a Princess. Don't overthink it.

Voice of the Hero

She is clearly not.

The Beast purred. Tabi could hear it in her voice. “How refined you make me out to be, fledgling.”

Nando clenched his jaw so tight Tabi was sure he would feel it in the morning.

Harri was writing at a furious pace. Tabi leaned over his shoulder, curious. He leaned back, voice low so as to not attract too much attention. “Say Dami’s right; say you’re all teaching Transformation ‘lessons’ after It takes you. What’s *this one* have to say?”

On the page were a brief group of quotes so far. Penned in bold and underlined at the bottom, *‘you live and die by my whims and my whims alone.’* A certain degree of dread in the implication.

“See?” Winnie gestured to Felipe, shrill voice catching Tabi’s attention. So as to remain inconspicuous, she refrained from pulling away from Harri, the two of them leaning into each

other like it was their most natural position. “There’s your answer, not everything is a metaphor. Can’t be simpler!”

“She’s fucking crazy,” *Ciro* said. And *Felipe* shook his head, pointing to the screen.

The slot the previous choice was in had not disappeared, but instead changed: *Quiet*’s genuine question left unanswered, they instead opted to adapt and rephrase it in accordance to the conversation.

“You have not even begun to scratch the surface of her need for you,” *Felipe* said, almost *proudly*.

- (Explore) "But why? Why do you want to kill me?"

Voice of the Hunted

Why does anything kill anything else? She needs to.

‘Need’ was a strange thing, for *Tabitha*. She had not needed to drink or eat when she was in the basement, nor sleep. She had felt the aching of those for the first time after waking up outside. Back then, she wasn’t even sure she had needed to breathe.

‘Need,’ like the thing in the dark ‘needed’ to eat her and her sister to ‘become whole,’ whatever that meant. Like they were pieces of its body.

It clamored to them, crawled and climbed on countless limbs, trailed through tunnels turning inwards endlessly to a core it had not yet conquered; it shattered them, broke their limits and broke loose of their boundaries, bound them together and up in its spindly threads as it sucked from their souls the essence of their suffering.

It took them in like sacrifices, held them like tributes.

It sank them in a silent sea of bodies, drowned them to steal the substance of their final breaths — and once it had them all, it would understand how to breathe a minute’s worth of time. But not what it meant to drown.

It killed them. Because it ‘needed’ to. Because their need to live was so much less important than its own.

So needful that *Quiet* couldn’t turn away, not really. Leaving meant dying. But dying? It meant staying.

She watched the *Beast*, but in place saw something else. Something that took, took, took.

I didn't say I wanted to kill you.

Voice of the Hero

It sounds like she wants to do something even worse.

Was dying the worst thing that could happen to someone? Before the game, she would have said ‘yes.’ Now, her answer had changed.

Because she, somehow, had been *alive* in there. Because the Entity, though she wished it could be true, did *not* kill her.

She heard Felipe inhale before she heard him speak. She must have tensed, because Harri wrapped his arm around her shoulder. There was something of a weight around her, not just at her back, but in her chest as well. A solemn declaration in words she did not know.

Felipe spoke, and Tabi grit her teeth. "Don't you see how she desires you? You're being cruel, teasing her like this. You ought to open your arms to her and run towards her instead, show her you're not afraid to be taken by her."

Abandoning all pretense, Ave grabbed the top of his ears and brought them down to the bottom, pushing his hands in for good measure.

Ciro tried again to hold Ave steady, literally. He did not flinch. Ciro took that as an invitation to wrap around him completely, leveling a steady glare in Felipe's direction.

The Narrator

What she wants only matters if she wins, and you're not going to let that happen.

A tickling sensation rises at the base of your neck.

Voice of the Hunted

Flee!

Voice of the Hero

We can't keep doing this.

- [Stay. Alive.]
- [Wait for her to strike, and hit her back.]
- [Play dead.]
- [Stand still.]

- [Stay. Alive.]

The Narrator

You're a little slower this time, or maybe she's a little faster. You avoid her slavering jaws, but she manages to graze you, her titanic momentum skinning you along your side.

It turned out “stay alive” in Quiet's words was not the same as “remain uninjured.” That was, if Winnie's theory was to be believed.

“That's bullshit!” Ciro shouted, just as Gonchi cursed under his breath.

His voice raised to a growl. “That’s it, first blood drawn, all bets are off.”

“What are you doing?” Ava was frowning at the chimera. “This isn’t a challenge.”

“And that is no rival,” the Beast declared, shaking her head as if to scare off flies. Her ears flopped with the movement. “Just another fledgling terrified of what I could do to them if I took their displays seriously.”

“You’re the one displaying!”

“Posturing,” Tabi couldn’t help correcting.

“Postu— Gloating!” Ava found the word she was looking for. “This doesn’t show how ‘strong’ you are. You aren’t any bigger or better for acting like this. You’re slinking about in the shadows, swiping at them in these weak little dances, ambushing them... because you’re *scared* to face them head on. You’re *scared* to be retaliated against! You run away the moment you’re seen! You’re pathetic!”

“You wanted a mate, I did not. Our methods are not the same.”

“I score because I *earn* it,” Ava crossed her arms. “It looks like you can only score when you’re sure he can’t fight back, asleep or exhausted.”

“It won’t matter in the end. I get what I want.” Her tongue extended from her mouth, flicking up to lick at her chops. She sniffed the air. “Always.”

That couldn’t be a threat. That couldn’t be.

Voice of the Hero

It's like being sideswiped by sandpaper, how is she that fast?!

You're bleeding now.

Cats’ tongues were rough, or so she had read— *what was that tone?*

“You don’t have to sound so fucking happy about it,” Ciro spat.

“Well, *I’m* happy for you Beastie! Great job!” Razor said, chipper as ever.

The Beast leaned her head to the side, lazily dodging Razor’s headpats. “Don’t patronize me.”

“What? I’m *nooooooot*,” she gasped, raising her hand up to her mouth in shocked offense. “It’s always so *annoying* when they try and dodge, I can’t believe you dealt with this on your first try. I’m so glad you caught him in the end!”

“Everything stops running eventually...” Clara whispered, staring intently at Ave, Ciro, and Paco’s group. Winnie’s tail fluffed by proxy, a short growl building in her throat.

Harri shuddered. Tabi rubbed his arm.

She hoped whatever declaration he made for her, she could return it.

The Narrator

You instinctively touch your side, testing her claim. It's wet and stings from the gentle touch of your fingertips.

Voice of the Hunted

A costly mistake. We can't make it again.

Voice of the Hero

We will make it again unless something changes. We have to break the pattern.

Voice of the Hunted

We need more time. She's cutting off our escape.

Our game is nearing its end.

- (Explore) I don't think I can keep this up.
- (Explore) "Okay, fine. Why do you want to eat me?"
- (Explore) "We don't have to kill each other. What if I helped you? What if we left together? If you could get out of here on your own, wouldn't you have already left?"
- (Explore) "I was sent to kill you because you're a threat to the world. I'm starting to believe that's true."
- [Run for the stairs.]

Felipe smiled as if the world itself had opened to him. He stood in the middle of the room, his body blocking the screen, eyes sparkling with his unchecked confirmation bias. "You see? Whatever you may call it, 'cat and grouse,' hard-to-get, it's all but a *game* to her."

"Yeah," Nando responded, "in a *bad* way!"

"There is no better way to take this," Felipe replied. "There is no escape, and you must understand, *escape* will never be your objective here."

Paco whispered something. Once, twice.

It took until Ave repeated it for Tabi to catch the words. "No way out...?" His hackles rose, eyes gleaming, as he pushed himself backwards. But Ciro was holding him.

Paco shook his head, started chanting, but Ave was breathing light and fast.

Felipe crouched down. Consoling Ave like the scared animal he was, he kept his voice low, soft. "Sometimes you want to be more than just important to someone. You want to be *part of* someone."

Ave shook his head frantically, but he could push neither words nor sound from his hyperventilating throat.

Dami shivered, reaching for Tabi's hand beside her. She found it. Tabi held it tight. Tabi held her close.

"*Love*," Felipe stressed the word, coming closer to the group. Ciro's attention was split between compassion, concern, and burning rage. His hands around Ave's shoulders trembled with the contradictions. "Is a form of *consumption*."

Quiet looked like he was about to vomit. Paler than pale. Tabi was half-worried he would faint.

Winnie shifted from a sitting position to a low prow, *daring* Felipe to approach any closer. Her claws dug into the couch cushion, hands poised to push her off into a swift tackle.

Felipe heeded the unspoken warning, but still stood in the middle of the room, still spoke with a quiet reverence and delusional lovesickness. "To love another is to consume them, to take their feelings and dreams into you. It is an act of hunger: base and needed for survival. To be deprived of their presence is starvation, gnawing away at sense."

"Hm."

Cain only needed to hum idly to pull the room's attention towards himself. It wasn't even a word, much less the monologue they'd all frozen in place to give Felipe the chance to deliver. Yet the room's temperature plummeted with his acknowledgement all the same. Almost a reprieve from the tension that had been building — if it were not for how excessively cold it became. Ave shivered so harshly Tabi could hear his teeth chattering away in his skull, body terrified yet fighting off the cold in just as much of a frenzy.

Harri felt tense beside her. Watching carefully. She gave him her other hand.

Cain was leaning on the couch, his arms sat on the headrest. Casually, bored; his spine and limbs were completely relaxed, disaffected by anything on or off or around the screen.

Tabi felt Dami's hand in hers almost... relax.

She pulled her in, wondering, worried. Dami turned to her, a certain relief in her tone. "He's not paying attention to me."

Tabi could not imagine putting her sister in the context of Felipe's worldview. Tabi could not grasp Felipe's worldview, if she were being honest with herself, *at all*. Her sister wasn't a planet, just as Felipe wasn't a satellite. No matter how much he wanted to pretend otherwise.

"No one's eating you," Tabi reassured her, a little bewildered by the words she was forced to say. "And— and no one can make you eat them, either. No one's eating anyone."

Cain's lidded eyes tracked Felipe with a precision his posture did not betray. He slid further down the couch, like he just couldn't be bothered to hold himself up a second longer.

Connie shivered, drawing forward to the edge of his seat. He pulled Quiet with him, Nando following his lead and doing the same.

“Do you... hear yourself, right now?” Ciro asked in genuine disbelief.

An arm resting on the couch limply fell down the headrest a moment. And then Cain lifted himself up, standing taller than the majority of the room again. He tilted his head towards Ciro. “It’s hard to hear much of anything when you’re deaf.”

“Tone-deaf,” Connie completed, corrected, and Cain nodded to himself. Connie shivered again, glancing behind him. Tabi wondered if Connie knew he was there earlier.

“It’s the best thing to be, what helps your beloved survive another day. It’s larger than what can fit in a mouth. You carry it with you, and there it stays until it’s needed,” Felipe said as if the interruption had not happened, his neck turning just slightly to the left, just almost in Dami’s direction.

“You haven’t been needed anywhere,” Cain said.

Felipe must not have heard it, because he turned back to the screen. “And now, she needs you.”

Unfortunately for Felipe, and highly fortunately for Tabi in her opinion, turning towards the screen also meant turning in the direction of the decider’s chair. The role of which was currently occupied by Gonchi, but the chair of which was not. Because Gonchi had removed himself from the chair. Gonchi had risen much like mountains did in earthquakes. Tall, invulnerable, and with a great deal of force behind them; a force which was now directed, point-blank, to Felipe’s precise location.

He didn’t even have time to tense. With the way he was shoved, Tabi wasn’t sure it would have helped at all. His feet left the ground, for a moment. The next moment, he was crashing not-too-gracefully on the Beast’s flank.

The mountain didn’t stop there. Momentum carried over, and he continued his path directly to Ave. For a moment, as he crouched down, Tabi almost thought he was going to console him. She should have known better from Ava.

Tabi didn’t hear him scream, but she could almost feel, if she focused, a *vibration*, something at the edge of understanding. A pitch too high a frequency for her ears, and on a different wavelength entirely.

What else, in hindsight, would Gonchi do *but* lift him up from below in both hands? What else would he do, but nearly knock Ciro off the couch in his haste? What else would he do but sling Ave around with him, and carry him like a wounded dog back with him to his seat? And, like a dog, settle him right at his front, in his lap, caged between his arms?

“What the f—?” Ciro sputtered.

“Are—?” Nando swallowed. “Are you sure you want him... up there? With you?”

“*You* did fine being ‘up there’ with...” Tabi couldn’t make out the rest of Connie’s sentence, but from the tilt of his head, she could hazard a guess.

Connie reached over Quiet to poke Nando in the chest. Yeah. Tabi could hazard a guess.

“You all talk way too much,” Gonchi dismissed, huddling down. Closing in on his catch. “You’re confusing my strategist.”

Ave was blinking as if waking from a bad dream. Tired of being tense. Not shivering anymore. Looked up.

“Hey there,” Gonchi said in a much softer voice than Tabi thought he was capable of, frankly. She glanced to Ava, who looked ecstatic. Tabi glanced back. Ave’s hair looked ruffled. Gonchi’s voice regained its volume as he resumed control of the mouse and keyboard. “We’re ending this.”

“And so we move on,” Cain said. “It really is that easy. Just a matter of fixing an attitude.”

- (Explore) I don't think I can keep this up.

Voice of the Hunted

You have to.

Voice of the Hero

We need to at least make an opening.

- (Explore) "Okay, fine. Why do you want to eat me?"

I don't question who I am or what I want. I simply do. To act is always better than to react. To do is always better than to watch.

Still talking a lot more than she should, Tabi noticed. Not even answering their questions. Wanting them to lose their breath?

“Typical non-answer,” Ciro complained, crossing his arms. “‘Just because!’ Just because she *fucking can*. Because *he*—” Ciro pointed down at Felipe— “*fucking let her*.”

“Hey. No one ‘*let her*’ do anything,” Oli corrected. “She played her hand and we played ours.”

“The game is rigged and you know it.” Ciro argued. “There wasn’t an option to fall asleep before, it was just to give her a chance to maul us.”

Oli pressed his palms together, pausing a moment without further comment. Looking for the right thing to say? He glanced a few places, too quick for Tabi to know for certain at who. At someone in Ciro’s group, either Paco or Winnie — and to Quiet, potentially, or someone beside him. To Dami. He took a breath. “If your choices are to confront someone on their

terms, or lay low waiting for the right place and the right time... I'm one all-for whatever it takes to keep us alive."

"And which one is *that*?" Ciro asked.

Oli scooted backward, pressing his back straight and parallel to his seat. The very opposite of relaxed. Palms hidden from view, touching the back. "I'll feel it in the moment."

Treating the Beast as an animal never felt quite like the right call to Tabitha, not with the way the chimera could talk and reason. And, more notoriously, the way she could *hurt*.

Animals didn't *calculate* like this.

"What does this mean about *us*?" Connie asked, still leaning forward in his seat. He clarified, "we're watching, not 'doing.' Is she making fun of us?"

"I don't think she knows about the viewing party we have going on, mate," Nando responded conversationally. "Or about *us*, before. Either way."

"We could 'do' things, though," Harri answered him.

"There's no harm in watching," Cain said. "That's all that's happening now; no one's 'doing' anything, not even him up there. Certainly not the little image of an animal up on the screen. It's all already been done. We're just playing catch-up."

"If you truly thought that, you'd have stayed silent all the while. We were supposed to influence things, if we didn't—" Harri shut his mouth with such force Tabi heard teeth clack together. Quiet stared at him with a prying intensity.

Cain tilted his head. "Go on."

The Narrator

I can't believe I'm saying this, but you'd do well to listen to her. Less standing around asking questions, more doing exactly as I say.

Voice of the Hunted

She's more tense this time. She means this next blow to be the last.

The Narrator

The mere thought of moving again makes your bloodied side ache.

Voice of the Hero

We're exhausted. We're bleeding.

Voice of the Hunted

We're still alive. We owe it to ourselves to move.

- [Again...]
- [Wait for her to strike, and hit her back.]
- [Play dead.]
- [Stand still.]

That seemed to be the greatest hint Quiet could give regarding his exhaustion. Ellipses and all; it wasn't even an action decided upon, merely pure repetition. Tabitha didn't want to think too hard about what *could* play out, if the warning wasn't heeded.

Gonchi's sigh was the crack of dry wood being caught by flames. "What *are* these two options— I'm blaming you," he pointed at Connie, who lifted his palms up and out in the most innocent gesture Tabi had ever seen. She didn't believe any of it. "You heard him, we owe it to ourselves to move. Haven't you heard of a second wind?"

"I'm pretty sure that's a myth," Nando spoke up.

"Well, we're the stuff *of* myths." Gonchi clicked the only option longer than a pitiful two words.

- [Wait for her to strike, and hit her back.]

Voice of the Hunted

This isn't going to work. We're in her domain, and we are bleeding.

Voice of the Hero

Exactly. If we don't do something now, we're finished.

The Narrator

As the Princess lunges at you from the shadows once more, you tighten your grip, lashing out with the blade.

But your injured side stretches and tears as you move, and you find yourself slowed by the sudden pain.

The Princess, maw unhinged and dripping, eyes fierce and full of hunger, closes in on you. You are devoured.

The game had to have glitched. Or Tabi hadn't heard it correctly. Or she needed glasses, too, because that couldn't be what she saw. What she heard.

'Unhinged' was not a strong enough word to describe what she'd seen: how the Beast's jaw dropped, how her mouth opened to double the length of her face and *kept falling*, the wide split across her face — her head deformed to fit her mouth — and the unfurled image of teeth... canines, sharp and long, elongated like sabers, growing even longer...

Everything went dark.

“No.” It was Gonchi’s only comment on the matter.

“Bullshit, just fucking bullshit.”

“You’re both right,” Felipe said. “He misconstrues her intent even after she’s explained herself. Fret not. We’re not dead. She promised on her word she wouldn’t kill us; it’s not in her nature to lie.”

Winnie’s exhale was shaky. “Wouldn’t scruffing him be easier? Knock him around a bit? Feathers give you reflux.”

“I get what I want easier this way.” The Beast’s voice rumbled with something like amusement. “I understand a kit may struggle to eat the same. You’re too sensitive on the inside, for now. You’ll grow to digest hardier meals.”

Winnie was turning the same green Dami was currently sporting on her face.

Tabi’s heart felt like it was bruising her ribcage.

What did he mean, they *weren’t dead*? Devoured but *not dead*? How could that be a positive alternative...?

“Ohh, I wouldn’t be so sure,” Oli said back.

“No,” Gonchi growled in frustration. “That’s not it; that cannot be it! He didn’t even give us a chance! This is... this is shit!”

“I’m sorry,” Ave mumbled. “I did my best.”

Voice of the Hero

I guess that's it then, isn't it...

The Narrator

Unfortunately for you, no. This isn't 'it.'

The dark screen faded into an image. And she saw.

A numb part of her brain thought it recognized worms. Big, fat, bloated worms. Squirming worms, which shone wetly with an unseen light. Stacked on top of each other in a nasty pile, forming walls and an indented, wavering trail through the bottom of the mass like a rivulet or ravine. Just another landscape of *meat*. But that was wrong.

These were insides, yes, and organic material. But it was far from any stage of decomposition; this was the most alive it could be.

Glowing with a healthy fleshy-pink glow, stomach lining wet with fresh mucosal membrane. Layered in folded musculature, thin strands of dark... were they veins? Arteries?... running

through the pink. Framing the foreground of the screen, too; as if compacted around the viewer. Holding them tight in soft, squishy bindings.

Devoured, but not dead, so that left...

The beating of her heart *hurt*.

The Narrator

You are in a dark and caustic place. A thick, fibrous lining constricts around you, its slick surface impossible to grip, your hands scrabbling uselessly at your surroundings as they compress in on you. Your lungs can barely expand in such a tiny space, not that the humid, finite air grants you more than a few shallow breaths at a time.

By her side, Harri blinked, dazed. "What am I looking at?"

Tabi had a sinking feeling. Like the rock she was clinging to amidst the ferocious sea was at risk of crumbling. That was before Harri shook his head forcefully.

His gaze sharpened, landing on the Beast and then on Quiet, considering, and then back on the screen. "Doesn't make sense."

Tabi felt her breathing slow. False alarm. The rock was solid as ever under her.

"The dimensions of this are physically impossible," he said more resolutely. "There's no concept of volume where this even begins to work out."

With how the Beast's face deformed... Tabi didn't want to complete that thought. It was too radical of a transformation; they'd all changed, but to change so quickly...? To *morph* around someone like that, to take their shape into your own...

Ava knocked the pair on their heads with her knuckles. Ow. Tabi raised her hand to her head, pained, and glared back at her, away from the dizzying light of the screen. Ava interrupted Tabi's incoming complaint to suggest, "maybe all that bulk was just feathers?"

Harri fixed his glasses. "That would give her indigestion well before it affected them too much."

"You're right," Cain said a ways away. "It's not possible. So what do you think *is* happening?"

Leadingly.

Ava scoffed.

The Narrator

The liquid pooling beneath you starts to seep into your skin. You itch, then sting, then burn as the acid begins its slow work.

“Slow,” Cain repeated. “So not anything to care about. There’s still plenty of time to waste away. And this body will waste away with it.”

“‘Slow’ nothing, it shouldn’t be near this quick!” Harri complained. “That’s not how it works!”

“Says the expert on being eaten alive...?” Connie teased.

“Stop talking like you were there,” Nando snapped. He itched at his arm, glancing down like he expected to see skin flaking off.

“How did it feel?” Cain asked.

“Bad,” Nando answered. His breathing hitched. “Awful.”

Felipe didn’t share the general opinion. “Now you’ll always be a part of her. You’ll always be together. Isn’t that beautiful? She needs you to survive! Is there anything more enjoyable in life than being needed?”

Cain tilted his head down low. Angled: to Nando, to Connie, to Quiet.

He leaned down to speak to them after a moment’s regard. “‘Bad’ or ‘enjoyable’... It doesn’t matter. She might be using us now, but we’ll wake up afterwards like it never happened. None of this will have mattered in the slightest.”

“There is no beauty in nature,” Ave retorted, voice just below a hushed whisper. “just survival and death.”

“She’s killing us. Who cares what sustains her if *we* end up dead for it?” Connie asked.

“What they said.” Ciro backed them up. “I don’t see anything here but a bunch of bullshit.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’ll live on in her forever,” Felipe said. “You’ll never be alone, you won’t have to be afraid. You’re becoming something new right now, something which won’t ever run from her again. You won’t even want to.”

Ave shivered, ducking low. Gonchi whispered something to him: something Tabi couldn’t hear. He turned away from the screen, so that his side huddled against Gonchi’s chest. His ears pressed flat along the sides of his head.

Borja glanced up to Thelka, then over to Ave. He gestured as if to rest a comforting hand on a shoulder or knee, if only he were closer; his palm merely rested on Thelka’s thigh. She didn’t so much as blink at the touch. She stared down at him, expectant. He cleared his throat. “It’s not a worthless death this time around,” he said, tone light and soft. “Your remains will fuel her and become a part of something so much *greater* than you.”

Gonchi tensed. His hands were balled into fists. His hands were shaking.

“What comes next will make all this worth it, you’ll see.” Borja’s tone was the tone used to hush a scared animal, to click his tongue and cajole it from its hiding place so as to catch it in

a net and wrap a leash around its neck. “You’ll be safe and happy forever. A moment’s pain gives way to pleasures only dreamed of. Peace, eternal, unlike anything you’ve ever felt before.”

"Peace?" Quiet choked out. "What peace?"

Nando wrapped his arms around their shoulders. Tabi tensed. Not for them, but for the presence which loomed behind them.

Gonchi glanced down at Ave, to his trembling hands. He exhaled, long and forceful, and sent a look to Ava across the room. She cracked her knuckles.

Harri waited for the echo of her popped bones to fade. “We won’t be ourselves, then. We’ll just be her.”

“You’ll be better,” Borja corrected. “You’ll be *hers*. And why would she ever hurt herself?”

Winnie’s tail went sweeping back and forth at that.

When I killed you I tried to leave this place, but it wouldn’t let me. ‘You belong down there,’ it screamed at me. ‘The world is better off without you in it.’

“See? She’s opening up to us! She trusts us now enough to speak of her experience. She never would have in our previous position. This is a good thing. We’re making progress.”

“We’re being killed!”

Felipe kept operating under the belief people wanted to hear him talk. “She’s given us a complete look into her most sensitive space. She’s never been in a more vulnerable position than she is now.”

“Vulnerable you say?” Gonchi said.

She’d go mad if she listened to him ramble on another second.

Her mind scurried and latched onto something. Cabins couldn’t talk. They most certainly didn’t scream or demean.

“Ooh, I know!” Razor glanced down at the Beast at her side. “Did you try jumping out of the window?”

The Beast blinked slowly. She’d been staring at where Ave had sat for a long while. Tabi wasn’t sure how long... but she couldn’t recall the last time she’d seen those great big eyes focus anywhere else, on *anyone* else. Her wide tongue flicked out to lick at her chops, ears flicking in annoyance. “There were no trees in my enclosure for me to climb. I couldn’t have reached it.”

“Is that why you tried to grow wings?” Ciro said.

“Not very well, either,” Connie joked, leaning towards Ciro with a hand covering his mouth. Not to actually conceal his gossiping (he was speaking too loud for that to be the intent), but just to make it extra obvious he was making fun of her.

After seeing Quiet’s wings, the Beast’s didn’t look grand in the slightest. Perhaps, early on, Tabi might have marveled at them only for how they disregarded laws of anatomy. Their musculature was awkward, as if another creature had simply been grafted onto an existing, sleek feline build. Now?

The Beast chuffed, stretching the little winglets at her sides. There was no way they were anything but decorative; their wingspan for a creature her size was unimpressive. Like ostriches’. Disproportionately small. “I didn’t *grow* wings.”

“What are you talking about, yes you did,” Ava retorted. “Like I grew horns. Biggest headache of my life. Not to mention the tail. That at least has uses.”

Was Gonchi blushing?

“These wings became a part of me the way all things do,” she said, stretching her neck out from her resting position to look over to Connie. A sound rumbled in her throat as her winglets flexed at her back, flapping in weak gesture. “*I* grow well. It’s *you* who stays small.”

“Excuse you, we’ve been growing too.” Connie retorted, flipping his scarf around. He raised his eyebrows over lidded eyes: the express manifestation of hubris on his face. “We have a height chart to prove it.”

The Beast laughed.

The Narrator

The flesh around you rumbles as the Princess begins to move, her thundering footfalls twisting you helplessly about. Your skin protests as the corrosive liquid sloshes around you, but there will be no respite for you in sight. The burning grows stronger and you can feel layers of you being peeled away.

“That’s fine,” Cain said. “We had no need for it anyway.”

“What are you talking about?” Paco asked, seemingly genuinely bewildered. “We *absolutely* need that, skin is a vital organ. It’s a layer of protection. It keeps your blood and body heat in and infection out. People *die* when they’re flayed alive.”

“We didn’t,” Cain said.

“Because she didn’t let us,” Harri reminded him. As if that were a detail which could be easily forgotten. Tabi didn’t think *she’d* forget that anytime soon.

“We still wouldn’t. Have you not been paying attention?” Cain stood up from where he’d been leaning over the couch again. “She cannot do anything to us that lasts.”

Harri stilled beside Tabi. His mouth opened, but nothing came out; a counterargument died before the thought could reach his tongue. Leaving him with nothing.

That sinking feeling again — much, much worse this time. Her chest tightened. Her body went cold. Her head felt light. Lighter. Weightless. Disconnected from the rest of her.

Her arm reached out beyond her discretion. Her hand latched onto Harri's shoulder. Her body jostled his.

She broke the surface. Solid ground again.

He blinked, shifting backwards slightly. Shivered. "That's not right."

Oli was staring at him. He nodded once. "Right..."

Harri and Oli shared a glance. With Ciro and Nando, too.

But, you—you don't belong down here. You came from somewhere else. You came from out there. So I consumed your dead heart, and I carried it in my throat, and I draped what was left of you on my back and I threw myself against that door.

The Narrator

She stops, her muscles tensing around you, and through the muffling layers of her flesh, you hear the whine of straining metal. And with a pop, she lurches forward, your body lurching right along with her.

Voice of the Hunted

Her chains. She's loose.

Felipe settled comfortably on the floor. He leaned towards Ave and Gonchi, speaking to the former's back. "You see?" He said, as if he spoke to comfort. "You're already understanding her better."

Gonchi shifted his position, tucking his arm around Ave more securely.

Ava rolled her eyes, rising from her seat with a grunt. It was remarkable just how much taller than Felipe she was; their positions just made it all the more apparent. "He just recognized a sound. It's not that deep."

"The description helped, too," Harri added.

"It did," Felipe said, smiling as if he'd only heard good news. "It's not just your minds which are aligned. Your bodies are moving as one, too."

He sighed dreamily. The sound made Tabi's skin crawl.

But even then, it denied me freedom. 'You cannot fool me by draping yourself in decay. I know your true nature and it is suffering.'

“Note the lack of detail there,” Harri said, leaning into Tabi’s side. “That’s an ambiguous double meaning. It could mean that her true nature is *to* suffer, to remain trapped down in the basement against her will forever, or that her true nature is to *inflict* suffering, to...”

Harri stalled for a moment. “To ‘harm everything around her,’ supposedly,” he said, hesitantly, but as though the words were quoted from somewhere. Had Tabi missed that? She thought she’d been rather thorough in her notes. He glanced at her, a certain... apprehension, cutting through his expression. And then his face steeled, any trace of doubt erased from his features.

He cleared his throat, turning away from her. “We don’t have too many candidates for whose voice the cabin might be speaking in. But if the cabin is anyone in particular’s design, then it’s likely to reflect its creator’s attitude towards the entity it holds captive...”

He trailed off again. He murmured something. Something like “who would’ve thought?” Something to himself, and not to her, a half-completed sentence missing a dependent clause.

A thought missing its natural conclusion. Tabi remembered Winnie saying a little something about that idea of ‘nature.’ *Nature isn’t what you want. It’s what you are.*

The barest hint, the inkling of a thought of her own. Their connection to the Entity, Thelka’s insistence that the powers within them which broke through their skin if not willingly released were destructive to their core, the cabin which eroded around her yet left her and her companion kept intact...

...Everything they knew pointed in *some* direction, but their best source of information was frustratingly vague except for His insistence on them following His unhelpful directions. He wouldn’t respect them unless...

...What happened to Rocio?

Did she want to find out?

“I... would say,” he said. Haltingly. “The latter definition is the one we’d go by, that the cabin meant.”

The Narrator

Gravity pulls at you as you're hefted upwards, the distant creaking of ancient wooden steps barely audible over the thudding of the Princess' heart.

And then it was gone and I was here. A new enclosure. A nicer cage. But still a prison.

I learn from my wounds. You're alive now. We can leave together.

Voice of the Hero

Does that work? Could she free herself if we're alive in here?

The Narrator

Do you really need me to give you a definitive answer for you to understand that the situation is grim? Stop her. Do something.

Voice of the Hunted

You still have that steel claw. Tear through her. Before we are her. Survive.

“Hell yes!” Gonchi praised loudly. “Finally!”

Voice of the Hero

Or we could use it to make this quick for ourselves. If she needs us in order to leave, we could at least deny her that.

Voice of the Hunted

That is a bad thing to do.

“What are you saying?!” Paco bolted upright. He flung himself too fast, the movement almost too much for his body to keep up.

“Who are you talking t—?” Ciro started to ask, but Paco had already launched himself at Nando.

“Why? Why would you—? I don’t want— we can’t die, not *here!* This is a *bad* place to end it, *here* of all places, *in* her?!”

Nando startled, backing himself into the couch, leaning away from Quiet and Connie both. Paco followed him. He raised his hands up in self-defense, palms open and front-facing, genuine confusion and panic written deep onto his face. “What else is there to do?”

“The place and time doesn’t matter,” Cain said, leaning over the couch again, his hands reaching for Paco’s own where he’d latched onto Nando’s shoulders. “We know we’ll end up back in the woods again.”

Paco’s breath came in short bursts. He was made of tension. His eyes were blown open wide, too wide. Ciro stared behind him, watching as his breaths got shorter, quicker.

Tabi could feel her own chest tightening. The outburst came from nowhere. She’d already been startled too many times today. Why did it feel like the walls were closing in?

“We don’t know how *‘in’* the woods we’ll *be*,” Paco said, digging his nails in. His eyes were watering. “We can’t— we can’t die like this. Not like this, not like *that*.”

“He’s right, this is a terrible idea,” Winnie’s voice rose up. Thinner than usual. Like there wasn’t enough air in the room.

“It’s all terrible,” Paco whined, and Nando’s breath hitched. “Terrible decision after terrible decision after terrible decision— and you tell him— you *tell him to—?! You want him to—!*”

“I—” Nando couldn’t breathe well enough to speak. Let alone to defend his own case.

“It doesn’t matter. We’re dying either way here, there’s no reason we can’t off ourselves to skip over the wait,” Cain reasoned, breathing far too even. Far steadier than anyone else in the room. His voice was soft. His voice was smooth. “We’ve chosen this before. It’s no different in this context, or any context. It works.”

He sounded sincere. He sounded calm.

He sounded experienced. He sounded trustworthy.

He sounded safe.

He sounded... right.

Cold, but at least cold air was breathable. Cold didn’t have to be bad. If she let it in...

His hands... drifted, slowly... “It’s fine,” he said, a dull whisper... around either side of Nando’s neck, over Paco’s—

“*Don’t touch me!*” Paco screamed. He backed away like Cain was a live wire, pulling Nando with him.

Cain’s hands followed. Lunged forward, just barely, hands clasped around nothing. And he stopped on a dime just as quick. Like Tabi hadn’t even seen him move.

She hadn’t, she was pretty sure. Or she wasn’t sure. People couldn’t stop momentum.

Nando was hyperventilating. That was the main thing she could hear.

“Let him go,” Cain said coolly. Like Paco was being unreasonable. He couldn’t climb over the couch to reach them.

The room was spinning. Too much. Too fast. She couldn’t keep track.

“Don’t touch me,” Paco repeated, backing up another couple steps. He was trembling all over. It was remarkable that he could speak, airy as it was. All Tabi was hearing from Nando were sharp, wheezing gasps and hiccups.

“Give him space, both of you.” Gonchi all but ordered. Like Ave was the only thing keeping him rooted to the chair.

Cain and Paco stared at each other a moment longer. A stalemate’s pause. Wide eyes and unblinking stares. Paco’s voice trembled. “D-don’t. *Don’t.*”

“I won’t need to,” Cain said, a statement which was not an unconditional agreement. A statement which, if Tabi had the space to think, could have even been a threat — or maybe it wasn’t, maybe...? He was *impossible* to read...! “If you let him go.”

“Paquito,” *Ciro* called. *Paco* turned to look at him. There was an open space beside him, the place he *was* sitting. “We’re not going to kill ourself. Promise. We’ll follow *Ave*. Survive.”

Paco trembled. And let *Nando* go. He did a double-take towards *Cain* before rushing to his original position, clamoring for both space and community. *Ciro* gave him both.

Nando collapsed, nearly falling onto his hands, caught instead by *Quiet*’s. Not quite lifting him up, more like holding him in place. Prevented from falling.

Connie sank down with them.

“Oookay, I’ve got this,” he half-laughed, half-said. “It’s fi— i-it’s *alright*, just take a deep breath.”

Nando stuttered through a partial inhale, managing just that and not much else.

Connie patted him on the back awkwardly. “Hey, everyone makes some stupid suggestions sometimes, alright? I make them all the time. I made *two* just now, you know, and I’m not even hatched there!”

Nando exhaled shakily in something that might’ve been something like a laugh.

Quiet’s arms reached up to pull him into a proper hug, settling backwards onto the couch again. Their limbs shimmered in light and mist, hands trailing up and down his back. *Nando* responded by hiccuping harder.

“Almost there,” *Connie* coached, “you almost had it. In and out, you know how it goes.”

A full inhale this time. Quickly expelled, with a guttural noise. A sound like choking.

“Good, that’s half of it there. I’ll do a few with you, then you’ve got it. We’re pretty experienced at the whole ‘breathing’ thing, been doing it for, like, at least a month at this point, right? Alright, I’m sorry. Not the time. Try it with me.”

Nando did better with something of a guide. At least enough to get air *in*, and not immediately push it out. His rhythm was far from steady, and his focus—

“I’m so— I— sh-shi— I didn’t— never wanted— sorr— don’t deser— sorry, I— I— I’m s—”

—left something to be desired. Using his every breath for a broken apology. Whatever sound he had made before was definitely not a laugh.

Cain exhaled. It was a long one. A demonstration, but not for *Nando* to follow; just for him to listen to. “You don’t have to apologize,” he told him. A pause. “This is typical of you.”

Harri sat ramrod straight.

“Shut up,” *Connie* said immediately in reaction. *Quiet* craned his head to rest it on *Nando*’s shoulder, tucking his head in with their hand.

“Yeah, can you fuck off?” Ciro added.

Borja took a breath in—

“Not the fucking time,” Ciro twisted around. “Save your shit, not hearing it.”

“Can we get back to the game now?” Razor whined. “I’m bored.”

Tabi could *hear* Ciro’s teeth grinding.

Apparently, Borja had decided to save that breath for the next occasion of dead air. “You’re doing the right thing.” He sounded impressed.

Nando’s breath stopped. For just a half second. And restarted, still shaky... but less. Like restarting a computer. A little better with each inhale.

A little more normal. Paused. Until it was over. Until he felt better. Until words were exchanged in a language she couldn’t speak.

Whatever they’d said, Dami’s eyes were watering.

Nando’s line had been the last of the scene. Since, there had been a list of options there. A list of options she hadn’t had the peace of mind to read, on a screen she’d been scared into ignoring, displaying a game she, for a brief moment, had totally forgotten was at play.

There were more important things than the past, for a moment. More important things than answers and truth.

For a moment, she’d considered raising her voice and even asking for the game to be turned off, for the time being. To be, at minimum, paused. Just for a moment.

Just a single move in a dance longer than her lifetime could compare to.

Didn’t she want to know?

Gonchi had turned away from the computer entirely, his back to it and his body facing the open room. He appraised Nando, then nodded, a slight comforting smile etching itself onto his face. “Good to go, Nandito?”

The ‘Nandito’ in question screwed his face up. “...Not the name.”

Gonchi barked a laugh, spinning in his chair. “That’s more like it.”

He scrolled down option after option after option — for *one* choice. No words, no thoughts. Just a man on a mission.

He didn’t even give Tabi time to read the menu.

- (Explore) [Dig with the steel claw.]

The Narrator

Though you have little room to move, you use what strength you can muster to drive the blade forward into the thick walls of tissue digesting you.

I can feel you tearing through me. But are you swift enough for it to matter?

Dami, finally, had enough. Red cuts ran through the fleshy interior of the space they were confined in, blood staining the no-longer-pristine blade. The skin of the hand holding it was bubbling in welts. She jerked away from the screen, burying her face into Tabi's shoulder to cover her eyes. She wrapped her arm around her sister.

Looking away, possibly, might have helped. But the *noise* was more disquieting than the visuals. The ugly squelching of wet flesh and metal slicing through meat — the sizzling of acid and sloshing of fluid in a tightly confined space.

Your body is violently jostled, the disruption causing burning skin to slough from raw muscle, and you hear what you can only assume is the Princess pulling against the door to the cabin.

The cage is still locked!

Tabi swallowed a gag at the visuals. Could *she* stomach this?... Hah. 'Stomach.' Hers was twisting in on itself.

"How is there a locked door?" She managed to ask through the nausea. "There wasn't a door before."

"I told you," Paco said. "I *told* you."

Tabitha did not appreciate him giving 'I told you so's after what he did. Spontaneously-manifesting doors or no.

"It's not like she can't barrel through the door," she chose to say. With the Beast's size and speed, Tabi didn't think a few planks of wood would do much against her. Especially when she sounded so enraged about it.

Felipe had gotten his voice back, to Tabi's endless chagrin. "It doesn't matter how far you dig. She'll die without you. As long as you remain together, nothing else matters. She doesn't need anything but you, kept deep inside, knitted and wove into her flesh."

Dami shuddered against her.

Gonchi, to his credit, wasn't giving Felipe's insane ramblings consideration, or even the time of day. He knew where the option he wanted *lived* in its list, now, and chose it without a second thought. That he had to scroll just a bit longer, past dialogue of Quiet begging for their life and freedom, barely registered by his determination to *keep going*.

Felipe shook his head with a condescending smile. "You're only bringing the two of you closer together."

- (Explore) [Dig with the steel claw.]

The Narrator

You slice again, deeper, rooting through her meat with the tip of your blade, until at last it finds her beating heart.

The pulling has turned to banging, as the Princess desperately throws everything at the cabin door. Your flesh screams as your reddened, spongy body is hit with fresh waves of blistering acid.

You can't hold me forever!

Felipe scoffed. "Keeping her here is hurting you just as much—"

"You need to stop talking," Gonchi interrupted.

It didn't even make sense. A locked door was a locked door; what was Quiet even meant to *do* in this situation, as they dissolved into her stomach acids? Unlock it with their *mind*? They had no key. They would never be given one.

It seemed more likely, to Tabi, that the Beast was shouting out to the cabin itself — or to that ephemeral 'them,' the Narrator, the one who always locked the door.

"You keep finding ways to make things more difficult than they have to be!"

The choice had changed its phrasing. Gonchi did not react.

- [Slay the Princess.]

He didn't even hesitate.

The Narrator

Though your body is dissolving, eroding into unrecognizable shapes, your will drives it forward. You have a target, and you will strike it.

Voice of the Hunted

We're too late, aren't we? This isn't survival, this is spite.

"And what's wrong with spite, Roble?" Winnie flicked her ear in Ave's direction.

He peeked around Gonchi, incredulous. "...it's Avellano."

"At least we're taking her out with us," Ciro told him. "That matters."

"Agreed. If you can't notch up a win, might as well go for a tie. It's better than an outright loss," Gonchi said.

"Especially since she hasn't been fighting fair," Ava added.

“Sometimes, the important thing isn’t *you* winning,” Winnie explained. Her claws dug into the cushions below her. “It’s making the other *lose*.”

“Sending a message,” Connie said.

Ave ducked out of attention. “I know that now,” he said quietly. His tone wasn’t all that convincing, subdued and submitting to the pressure of the room’s eyes on him.

The Narrator

No. It's something better. It's fulfilling a noble destiny. Your lone functioning arm lashes out, stabbing up towards the Princess' heart.

“Ew,” Connie said, scooting aimlessly in his seat. “Actually, I take it back. I’m not agreeing with Him.”

“What use is ‘being special’ or having a ‘noble destiny’ if you’re not alive to reap your reward?” Oli complained.

“It’s nothing to miss,” Cain said.

“Well, either way,” Oli huffed. “Seems like a whole lot of hard work for a whole lot of nothing.”

“Exactly.”

So you found a way to kill me. Then we'll die together, and I will see you again soon.

“Not even a wince?” Harri noted.

Borja blinked at the screen, then bowed his head with closed eyes. “We’ll do better next time.”

The Narrator

With those prophetic words, you do not draw another breath, your body tangled and melting in the cooling folds of the Princess' flesh. Everything goes dark, and you die.

But at least you've saved the world. I hope.

“Wait, He can get a final word in even after telling us we’re dead?” Tabi asked.

“Yeah,” Harri answered easily. “If He has something He wants to say. Surprised He could be optimistic about His parting words, though.”

With the screen dimming for the transition to come, Tabi could almost breathe right again. She settled into her seat, turning to him as if in casual conversation. Even if nothing could truly be casual within these walls. “Did He say something to you?”

It was the only rational follow-up to Harri’s statement on the matter.

“Oh, the same old shit He normally gives,” Harri said. He almost grinned. “Said ‘I hope this was worth it,’ sick bastard. And it was.”

The slightest bloom of warmth in her chest. “How sweet,” she remarked.

Dami pinched her arm. She turned her head to see her sister giving her the most expectant look of her life, eyebrows raised and all.

...What? What was she supposed to say???

Her eyes darted away, trying to think. The title card for the next Chapter revealed itself, *‘The Wild.’*

Harri beside her tensed, the change barely perceptible. And—

Winnie *shrieked*.

Spitting, hissing, climbing back up onto the headrest of the couch on all fours, balancing perched there above the rest of them like a housecat. Her eyes were huge. Her pupils were slits. Her tail stood on its end, rigid like the rest of her.

“Turn it off.” Ciro whipped his head around to Gonchi.

A low growl built in Winnie’s throat. The skin of her arms was blooming red. Irritated, scratchy. No petals in sight, not yet. Tabi raised her arm to block Dami from rising to assistance as she was so inclined to do.

Ciro turned to her. Said something in too soft a voice to hear. Connie leaned over, towards the commotion. Cain drifted behind the couch like a shadow on the wall.

The screen dimmed, plunging the room in darkness for a moment.

Plethora rose, walking nimbly to the laptop and crossing over Gonchi to shut its screen. The TV truly went dark then. It took an additional second for the room’s lights to flick on, blinding from the contrast. Dimly, Tabi noticed Felipe speechless, eyes wide, clutching at his chest.

They turned to Winnie, crossing their arms at her and holding Gonchi’s shoulders to steady him and raising Ave’s head with a finger under his chin. They smiled reassuringly and glared disapprovingly and stared in blank exasperation.

Ave’s head darted back, his teeth bared at the unwanted touch. Gonchi shook their hands off him roughly, scooting away in his seat, dragging Ave with him. If anything, Winnie only seemed to tense more. Like a statue. A gargoyle perched on its stand.

Plethora sighed five breaths at once.

“We’ll take a break while we can, between Chapters,” they said. Their many faces blinked out of sync. Their hands, displaced, came together at their middle. “Bathroom’s at the end of the hall if you boys need direction.”

Unexpectedly, Quiet rose. They looked— they looked *bad*. Nando stared after them for a brief second before rising too, brows furrowed and a hand raised to steady them by their arm. Slow, uncertain movements.

Connie glanced between Winnie and those two. His eyes met Ciro's at some point in the repetitive turn, and he cast one fleeting look Quiet's way — Nando nodded — before scooting beneath where Winnie had perched.

Fernando wasn't sure, exactly, where they were headed. *Away*, he hoped. *Deeper in*, he dreaded. He knew nothing of the layout of this place. Just a direction they'd been pointed in and a mess of halls and doors, otherwise.

He knew the others were following. A couple, at least. Footsteps raining down on flooring like the beat of a drum, sounding out over each other so he couldn't discern one from the rest. Someone heavy and someone light, but it was hard to tell beyond that.

He liked to think he knew some of his housemates well enough to identify them on footfall alone, individually. He would have to glance back to see them now, which meant he wouldn't be seeing them. He wasn't about to take his eyes off Quiet.

He trusted the others implicitly, for the most part. More than he trusted himself, at least. His judgement and his terrible decisions; his inclinations to have them hurt themselves, because he didn't think. Because that was his first thought when looking for a way out.

Two was a pattern. Two was too much. He'd done too much. He'd never done anything right.

His breathing still wasn't even. He kept himself quiet. Kept that thing curling inside his ribs and around his treacherous heart under lock and key. He wasn't the priority. Even if Quiet thought otherwise. Nothing worth salvaging.

The other two caught up; Gonchi and Ave. A rare moment of correct judgement for him: someone heavy and someone light. He swallowed something heavy in his throat, painfully so, and kept his breathing light. Through his nose, not his mouth.

Held it for three seconds. Something oft repeating. Hero, Decider, Contrarian. Nando, Quiet, Connie. One, two, three.

Exhale.

Quiet stumbled as they flanked them, face ashen and funereal. Around them, in that hallway, the walls were black. Paint, or mold?

They should've gone outside, Nando immediately recognized. The air was heavy and thick with tension. The air was light and sparse. It wasn't fresh. It smelled like wood rot. He caught them by the bend in their arm. *I should have brought them outside*.

He needed to stabilize them on his own unsteady feet. He faltered.

Not fast enough. Ave ducked between them, held their hands, guided them to sit instead of fall. Guided them to rest instead of collapse.

Not strong enough. Gonchi caught him. Unlike how he couldn't catch Quiet. Why couldn't he? They weighed *nothing*. They were small and frail and *alone* and he wasn't at their side.

Like a babbling stream, words were pouring out of them without end in sight, without a mouth parted.

I thought I was ready. (Empathy)

I'm sorry. (Forgiveness)

(Concern) Talk to them. They're here for you.

Oh, he thought. It's happening again.

(Concern) What?

A sickening sort of familiarity. From the very first time they had opened their eyes to new bodies, new senses, new life, it had been easy to realize their Decider wasn't speaking aloud, for the week it happened. He had thought it a curse, a Faustian contract. Like a fairytale. His voice for theirs.

It turned out that it had not been something quite as irreversible, and yet it was happening again.

Like a fairytale, but everything that was told was something that already happened. In a place without time, a place that wasn't truly a place.

Like a fairytale, because they needed the distance.

He'd slid down the wall with them. He must have, because he was on the floor. He caught his breath as their own caught in their throat, tangled up in their uncooperative vocal chords. He took a deep breath, loud enough for them to listen to, and let them choose to mirror it.

Ave and Gonchi were staring at him, he realized. They were waiting for *him* to speak.

Running wasn't his strong suit, like Ave, and he couldn't fight back as well as Gonchi, but he was still the First. Quiet *trusted* him, against all evidence that said that wasn't a good choice. What else could Nando do but repay that trust?

"We're in a hallway," he started, voice thinner than he'd have liked it to be. He glanced down the way. It stretched farther than he could see. "A long one, from the looks of it. For a house, it isn't decorated much like a home. The walls are bare. It's a hall meant to be walked through without looking too closely at the details, I reckon. We haven't gone far in, the living room we came from is closer than the end of the hall is by a long shot. There's still time to turn back."

Another deep breath in. And out.

“This place is cramped,” he said without thinking. Five people in a thin little hallway didn’t inspire flattering words. “Closed-off, even with all the doors. The outside would be more open.”

He hesitated a second. “We could... get out of here,” he suggested. Quiet couldn’t speak, couldn’t say ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ couldn’t accept or reject the offer.

They remained silent. Said nothing.

Right. That was alright. They didn’t need to.

The answer felt implicit. Unspoken. Inherently understood. “Yeah. I think we should. There are better places to take a break. Let’s go for a walk.”

Ave rose. Gonchi lifted Quiet up, and they reached forward to let Nando hold them, too. He wrapped his arm around their back and paid no mind to the way they leaned into his side, head turned into him. They closed their eyes and took a breath.

(Recognition) (Safety) The woods.

He could feel the tension releasing, muscles loosening. They smelled like feathers and cinnamon and the early morning. They leaned on him. He let them; he’d hold them up as best he could. He’d lead them, if they needed, he would try his best. All things considered.

“I’ve got you,” he breathed against them. It was the clearest breath he’d taken in a good while. And it was the honest truth. It ruffled their hair, warm against their face. “You’re good.”

He could physically feel the weight of Gonchi's stare. When Nando met his eyes, all he got was raised eyebrows.

Since when was Gonchi subtle? (Or was he just obvious?) What did he want him to do? (What did he want to do?)

He wanted to take them away. Just for a little while. He could take them somewhere safe, someplace quiet, so they didn’t have to compete for space or silence. Somewhere they could be alone. Just to collect themselves.

He could at least take them in his arms. In thread. With a subtle chill that made it natural to huddle closer for warmth, and a steadying hum of some unbroken silent understanding that made the world not quite so noisy.

He hugged them. They were trembling. He wouldn’t point it out this time.

It would have to be enough, for now. A reassurance until they found their voice again. He would listen regardless.

“Then let's go.”

Chapter End Notes

Dua: Another day, another chapter! We're very happy to be writing Tabi again!

End Notes

Just so we're on the same page

Prisoner - Tabi/Tabitha

Damsel - Dami/Damiana

Witch - Winnie/Winifred

Tower - Thelka

Adversary - Ava

Nightmare - Clara

Spectre - Grace

Works inspired by this one

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