

## Epilogue of the Voices

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# Epilogue of the Voices

by [Vaevictis\\_Asmadi](#)

## Summary

After the Long Quiet accepts godhood and leaves the Construct with the Shifting Mound, the Voice of the Hero finds himself back in the cabin once more. He sets out to find the other Voices, and perhaps some clues on what they should do next...

# Chapter 1

He felt a hundred hands gripping him. Each one pulled only slightly, but together it felt like they would rip him into pieces. Every step closer to that mirror added another dozen hands pulling him in a dozen new directions. Fear rose inside him until he felt like he was drowning. Something deep within him finally gave and ripped, and then there was nothing.

And then he was back. His mind flailed, struggling to make sense of who and where he was. He desperately flung his thoughts backwards, back to what he could remember—arms, a mirror, and before that...everything. He remembered walking the path to the cabin more times than he could count. Taking those well-worn steps into the basement. He remembered the Princess—saving her, slaying her, and being slain by her. He struggled to stay afloat as he was flooded with memories, many of which conflicted with each other but all of which were his. He fought to keep his identity in this storm. And then it was over, and he was himself. He was the Voice of the Hero, though no one would know him by that name—not even himself.

Hero looked around to see the familiar walls of the cabin, looking just like it always did at the beginning. Before things changed. Though it seemed off, and it took him a moment to place why, until he realized—there was no basement door. The table was still there, though the pristine blade was missing. There was even a door exiting the cabin, tantalizingly near, but nothing leading further in. That was completely new, and he struggled to understand it for many long seconds.

His thoughts were interrupted by two voices talking through the windows—familiar, and yet somehow strange. The Princess spoke, and the body he once inhabited replied, yet both were inexplicably *different* than he remembered. More powerful, perhaps, or just confident. They spoke of godhood, how the Princess was really the Shifting Mound, a god of chaos and change, and how the body Hero had inhabited was really the Long Quiet, god of stasis and stability. Apparently, the Narrator had created them both out of one being in an attempt to kill the Shifting Mound, ending change and death with it.

The Long Quiet and Shifting Mound argued, for a time, as to what their purpose was. About how they could end the world, and whether such a thing was crueler than letting it exist in the moment of its death for all eternity. For a moment Hero considered the possibility that the Long Quiet would attempt to put an end to her once and for all, and prepared to jump in and assist in any way he could. But his interference was not required, and the conflict between the gods abated.

Hero felt the cabin shake and shudder as *something* moved and strained. The Long Quiet shifted, waking old limbs as he pushed against reality itself.

“I love you.”

As the echo of the Shifting Mound’s sentence resounded through the cabin, a great crack opened outside the window, light spilling in from somewhere *else*. Somewhere far away.

Hero found a memory from one version of himself and realized that the Narrator's construct was broken, once and for all.

"I guess we decided to end the world after all," he muttered to himself. "I suppose killing her never felt quite right, even after everything she's done to us."

He sighed, expecting the world to fade away like it had done so many times before, finally ending as the Narrator promised. And yet, nothing seemed to change, at least within the cabin. Instead, things seemed to carry on exactly as they had before.

He peeked out of the window at the cabin's new surroundings. The hill the cabin sat on looked much the same as it always had.

"I guess the Narrator was wrong about her. Or maybe the cold one was right and we all exist outside of the world after all."

With that last statement, Hero realized something.

"Where are the others, anyway? I'm here, so they must be around somewhere, right? I suppose I should find them, if I can. It's not like I'm doing anything else."

He took a deep breath and stepped out of the cabin. It was time to search for the other Voices, and perhaps some clues to what he should do next.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Now, I am *certain* the path should be just around this corner,” Skeptic said, not for the first time since getting lost in this seemingly-endless forest.

This place was a puzzle, one he was *so close* to solving. That was why he’d left the path in the first place; he knew where it led already, and he was confident that he could find his way back once he’d thoroughly explored the surrounding woods. However, he quickly got turned around by the twisting and shadowy trees and became completely lost.

Of course, navigating out of the forest would be an easy task for him, or so he thought. If he just kept his cool and mapped out the surroundings, he would soon know the location of every branch and twig in the place, and finding the path from there would be easy. He was certain that every minute he spent exploring brought him closer to the exit. After all, he had to run back into the path *eventually*, right?

He took a breath, steeled his nerves, and turned the corner—only to see yet more trees. He carefully scratched an arrow and a number into the tree beside him so if he ever found his way back to this point, he would know exactly where he was. His mental map of the woods was slowly and steadily getting filled in, and soon—so *very* soon—he would escape this labyrinth.

Hours later, Skeptic was finally forced to admit that he had no idea how to navigate this place. By his reckoning, he should have crossed over the trail he’d left a dozen times by now, and yet he saw none of his arrows, no mark of his passage. Nothing but more trees and rocks, practically indistinguishable from each other.

He decided it was time for a break. *I just need a moment to rest*, he reassured himself, pointedly ignoring the icy claw of fear beginning to grip his heart.

He knew there had to be a way to reason an escape from this place. That was the only possibility—this was just a forest. Just a simple forest. It had to be, that was the only possibility that made sense—that was the only acceptable explanation. He just needed to rest, and then he would find the thread that tied it all together.

Skeptic’s mind soon wandered to the topic he’d at first set aside until after he escaped. Maybe thinking about something else would give his mind the room to free him.

“Where are all the others?” he wondered aloud. “The last thing I remember is that mirror, but I remember seeing it before—what changed? What made that the last time?”

He thought back to all the times he’d died, all the versions of the Princess he had met, and tried to find some clue to what made last time different. But he found nothing; every path ended in the mirror. Whatever clues he needed to learn the truth must have been beyond it.

While Skeptic was lost in thought, the shadows of the forest stretched and twisted, growing over the way he came. Trees creaked and bent and shifted while he was distracted, until the area around him was unrecognizable. By the time he refocused and looked around, he could no longer tell which way he had come from, and which direction he was going.

He sighed, stood, and began to make his way forward yet again. He was beginning to give up on the idea that a single thread could possibly tie together this place, that there really was a puzzle underneath it all. It seemed that just by trying to map it, he was changing whatever structure there may have been before. That idea shot through his core, and his eyes widened in realization.

“There’s an idea,” he said aloud. “What if that’s the trick—that there is no trick at all? What if by trying to understand it, I’m just making it worse for myself?”

Skeptic took a breath and closed his eyes. After wandering for hours, he’d tried everything he could think of, except this: the very last thing he would ever do in a forest, the absolute worst idea someone could have when they’re lost.

He closed his eyes, picked a direction at random, and walked. He nearly stumbled a few times but caught himself before he could fall too hard—and managed to keep his eyes firmly shut. Even without his sight, he kept trying to find a pattern in the roots he stepped over, the trees he felt with his outstretched hands, the rocks he stubbed his toes against, but he ignored them all and walked truly blind, his mind empty of all predictions and expectations.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going!” shouted a familiar voice. Skeptic’s eyes shot open, and there before him was Hero, and just beyond him was the path.

Skeptic could have wept at the sight. He never expected to feel so much joy at seeing the path once again. As if sensing something was wrong, concern covered Hero’s face.

“Are you alright? I heard you tromping through the woods, but when I went to investigate, you nearly ran right into me. Were you walking with your eyes closed or something?” he asked incredulously.

Skeptic’s nerves settled quickly now that he was out of the woods, and he took a breath to steady himself.

“Of course I was. This place changes based on your perception, doesn’t it? Just like the Princess did. I got lost for a while because I thought it was a puzzle of some kind, so I made it far more complicated than it really was. Once I closed my eyes, it wasn’t a puzzle anymore, and I found my way out,” Skeptic explained.

“Huh. That...actually explains a lot,” Hero said.

“So, I assume you’re looking for the rest of us?” Skeptic asked. When Hero looked at him in shock, Skeptic shrugged like it was obvious.

“...yeah, I am. Want to join?”

“Of course,” Skeptic chuckled. “You’d be lost without me.”

The two Voices set off down the path, both far more comfortable now that they were back in each other’s presence.

## Chapter End Notes

Author here! This will probably be the last update for a little while (hopefully not too long though). I actually have most of the story written (by that I mean, 15K more words), I just happen to be missing the next couple chapters. So I'll be working on those for a while, and once they're done I can probably post the full thing in one go!

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Cheated continued to pace around the edges of the pit, counting his steps as he went. Every few steps, he'd pass long scratches left by his desperate attempts to climb out, back when he still hoped that one wall would have a slight angle or lip that would let him find purchase. The scratches matched the creeping boredom and fury clawing at his heart; emotions that he was desperate to keep contained. So, he counted paces and tried to ignore the hollow's sole other occupant.

For his part, Opportunist watched Cheated with a bemused expression, though internally his mind was racing. He craved release from this damnable hole and was looking for any opening that might offer him freedom—and most importantly, one that did not put him at risk of betrayal. After watching Cheated pace for who knows how long, he finally spoke.

“When are you going to admit that you’re never going to escape on your own? Wearing a trench into the edges won’t get us out of here any quicker. In fact, if you keep at it for long enough, it might just make the pit even deeper! So, you should go ahead and boost me out of here so we can move on with our lives.”

Cheated's head whipped around to face him, a snarl on his face and rage burning in his eyes. He stalked towards the seated Opportunist, who was suddenly thankful that evil looks were not, in fact, fatal.

“And trust *you*?!” he roared. “If you really wanted to help anyone but yourself, you would’ve helped me get us both out ages ago, and we’d be well on our way to...somewhere else by now! But no, you refused, which means you’re plotting something awful, as usual! I know if I get you out, you’ll just run away and leave me here!”

“You can’t know that for certain! But I can’t trust you to go first; I know you’re just looking for any opportunity to be rid of me—you already said as much before. I’m not going to let that happen,” Opportunist replied, his voice not as angry as Cheated's but filled with no less conviction.

“Maybe that’s exactly what you deserve!”

“Then I guess we’ll both stay here and rot.”

Cheated wasn't happy about the current situation, far from it, but he would be *damned* if he let that slime betray him. It frustrated him to no end that, of all the people he could have been trapped with, it had to be the treacherous one. Unfortunately, the cruel reality was that they would have to work together to escape this place. It really seemed the world was out to get him, as per usual.



He resumed his pacing, trying to calm his mind. He eventually paused in front of a random section of wall and shrugged, a slow motion that tried—and failed—to conceal his anxiety. He crouched as low as he could, then leapt into the air. His hands and feet scratched against the stone wall so hard it felt like his claws were peeling off, trying so desperately to find any sort of purchase that even his vestigial wings were flapping.

But it was all in vain. When he inevitably hit the ground again, his legs buckled beneath him, his sore muscles exhausted and spasming from their countless hours of use. He turned and sat back against the wall with a huff, finally giving himself the chance to rest, only to be faced with the hundreds of long scratches from his previous failures.

Opportunist was little happier than Cheated. While the other Voice *claimed* to want to free them both, he had also made it obvious that he hated him. Opportunist knew all the Voices did. While some were better at hiding it, he wasn't so blind as to not realize they all thought him slime.

Even if he hadn't implied it earlier, Opportunist knew that Cheated would abandon him here to rot if given the chance—because that's precisely what Opportunist would do in his place. He could feel Cheated's eyes on him, could see plots and schemes forming behind those pupils. Opportunist resolved to never give him the chance to put any of those plans into action. But finally, he saw a chance, and spoke.

"Are you *quite certain* you don't want to try something else for once? For example—and I'm just thinking aloud here—boosting me out of here?"

"Exactly how stupid do you think I am?" Cheated snarled back, though with less of his usual fire. "You're nothing but a liar and a backstabber. As much as I want to be rid of you, I'm not going to trust *you*. As soon as you escape, you'll just disappear and leave me here to rot!"

"Excuse me, but I have been *nothing* but polite to you this entire time. I'm not sure what I did to piss you off so much, but I just don't think I deserve this attitude and distrust! So I'm just not going to talk to you until you're feeling a little more sociable," Opportunist said as he lay on the ground and turned away from Cheated.

"Fine!" Cheated replied, his voice filled with hatred and venom, despite his exhaustion.

But soon, Cheated's mind began to wander, and as exhaustion set in it brought a deep weariness that washed away the fury and spite that normally fueled him. He ached to the core; he hated the suspicion and distrust, no matter how deserved it seemed.

The realization dawned on Cheated slowly. It crept from the dark corners of his mind as if to mirror the fatigue fading from his tortured limbs, until hours later even he could ignore it no longer—Opportunist was right. When the other Voice had brought up the obvious and easiest way to escape hours earlier, Cheated rejected it immediately, even going so far as to spend hours throwing himself against the pit walls until his fingers bled and his limbs shook. Even though Opportunist had done nothing to suggest betrayal, besides being his usual shady self, Cheated had refused to trust him. It was Cheated who first brought up the idea of treachery, and it was Cheated who, filled with anger and distrust, implied leaving Opportunist behind.

No wonder the other Voice didn't trust him. Cheated finally realized that, from Opportunist's perspective, all signs pointed to *Cheated* being the most likely to betray *him*.

The old fury tried to claw its way back into his heart, tried to convince him that it was somehow the other Voice's fault, that he was being manipulated, but it lacked its former strength. No matter how angry he was at the situation, he couldn't ignore the fact that Opportunist hadn't done anything wrong. He was traitorous for sure, but only to protect the Voices. Perhaps he deserved to be given the benefit of the doubt.

"I'm sorry."

His voice was almost a whisper, as if some hidden part of him was still desperate to pretend it was not true, still trying to conceal the cold truth from the world, but it was still loud enough to reach Opportunist's ears. The other Voice sat up with a start and looked over at Cheated in surprise.

"You're right, I've been unfair," Cheated continued as he moved into a crouch, his legs finally rested enough to bear his own weight without shaking. He moved his hands above his head until they formed a step, his entire body turned into a coiled spring. "Let me make it right."

Opportunist's gaze was filled with suspicion and doubt, and Cheated worried he may have ruined any chance of the other Voice ever trusting him again. Luckily, his apology must have been convincing, because after a moment he nodded and walked towards where Cheated crouched. He gingerly stepped onto Cheated's hands and barely restrained a yelp as Cheated's arms suddenly straightened and he was lifted high into the air.

Opportunist scrambled at the cliff face for a long moment, desperate to find any sort of purchase as Cheated's arms began to shake beneath his feet. Finally, his claws caught on something, and he pulled himself onto solid ground. He lay there for a moment, panting heavily, then stood and took a few long steps into the forest, snickering to himself. He'd finally escaped, and removed a potential threat, and he'd barely had to lift a finger to do it.

"I knew it."

Opportunist froze at the words, filled with none of the rage he expected from Cheated. He'd predicted shouts, screams, promises of vengeance and punishment, not...quiet resignation. The shock was enough to stop Opportunist in his tracks, and send one thought echoing through his mind:

*Surely, I'm better than this—aren't I?*

This wasn't like with the Princess; Cheated wasn't a threat to him, at least not before Opportunist refused to help him escape. Now that he was already out of the pit, there wasn't anything Cheated could really do to him. There was no good reason to leave him behind—no reason but spite and fear.

When he walked away, it was almost as if his body acted on his own, his betrayal of Cheated less a conscious choice and more a force of habit. And as much as he could play the part of a

loyal subject, Opportunist would *not* be ruled by anyone—not even his past self. He would not let his previous decisions restrain him now.

But more than that, Opportunist had watched Cheated spend hours trying everything he could think of to avoid having to trust him. If he hadn't said the right thing at the right time, they would likely be stuck in that pit for all time, just because Cheated was so afraid of a betrayal from Opportunist. And that...didn't feel good.

Decision made, he willed his body back, back to the edge of the pit that seemed so much deeper from up here. Cheated was curled up in a ball below, shrouded in shadow, with a bevy of fresh claw marks etched into the stone cliff above him. He looked so small and pitiful from the top of the cliff, so unlike the proud and spiteful Voice Opportunist knew.

Opportunist reached his hand down, and in that moment, it was as if the floor of the pit rose to meet him, until it seemed so close that Cheated wouldn't even need his help to escape. The trapped Voice looked up at Opportunist in shock and confusion, and Opportunist waved his hand impatiently.

“Well? You seemed so eager to get out before—get a move on!”

Cheated snatched at his hand, like he expected Opportunist to yank it away at the last second, and pulled so hard it nearly overbalanced Opportunist and sent him tumbling back into the pit. But by pulling together, the two Voices managed to finally get Cheated out, and they both breathed heavily for a long moment—though they also kept a close eye on the other, and they moved further away from the edge of the pit first.

Once they'd recovered, Opportunist bounced up and started walking.

“Well, time to get a move on, let's go!” he exclaimed, speaking perhaps a little quicker than usual.

“Wait,” Cheated said, and Opportunist slumped slightly as he turned to face the other Voice, a resigned look on his face. He'd earned whatever retribution Cheated saw fit to give, and his newfound honor and pride would last long enough to prevent him begging pitifully for mercy.

Instead, Cheated merely asked a question, almost gently—like he was worried even asking it would be enough to break the fragile truce between the pair.

“Why?” was all he asked. *Why did you come back for me?* was what he left unsaid.

Opportunist puffed his feathers out and looked down his beak imperiously at the other Voice.

“What is true power, if not the ability to reach down and help those less fortunate than yourself?” he said, his haughty tone immediately causing Cheated to grit his teeth.

“Besides, who would I stab in the back without you around? I certainly can't backstab myself, after all,” Opportunist continued, his sly grin far more genuine than usual.

“I'm going to hit you,” Cheated said.

The other Voice raised his fist and stepped forward as if to make good his promise—though even at his most cynical and suspicious, Opportunist would have been able to tell he was not serious. The tension between them broke, and Opportunist laughed. He ran off into the woods, and soon Cheated was laughing and running with him.

## Chapter End Notes

Boy, I sure do love writing ironic hells! I wonder what horrors I'll subject the other Voices to...

## Chapter 4

“This is just sad,” Contrarian sighed.

He moved his hand from his chin and stood from the tree root he’d been using as a makeshift chair since he arrived. He’d been waiting for something, *anything*, to change. The last time he’d refused to go to the cabin, the world had ended not too long after—he’d been hoping a similar refusal might reset the world and bring the other Voices back. It was...wrong, being on his own.

For as long as he could remember, he’d had but one goal: to mess with the Narrator as much as possible. Well, and maybe to keep the other Voices and the big man from being too serious while he was at it. He’d realized early on that their actions had no consequences, that there was really no point to anything—so why not have a little fun with life?

But things were different now. He was back where it always started, the winding path through the woods stretching before and behind him. He knew both ways would take him to the cabin, but he just couldn’t bother to move. What would be the point? With no Narrator to annoy and no other Voices to lighten up, there wasn’t anything to do but think—and remember.

He remembered the same actions taken a hundred times or more with only subtle differences—what they said in what order, how they went down the stairs, whether they took the blade. He remembered walking into the woods, away from the cabin, despite the Narrator’s fury, and watching the world unravel around them, just as promised; and he remembered repeating it all again and again and *again*.

And not once, not in any of the many variations of the paths he walked, could he remember anything really mattering. Sure, sometimes the world “ended”—but they just came back to the path every time. If they slew the Princess, or she murdered them, or they let her escape—it all ended the same way, in the end, with the arms taking her away, and all of them standing before the mirror in an empty void.

It was one thing to *think* that nothing he did mattered; he believed that a meaningless existence gave him the freedom to choose his own meaning, and that was nice. But it was another thing entirely to see the meaninglessness of any action for himself, to live a thousand lifetimes of slightly different choices and to still see nothing change at all. Like hearing the same joke too many times, it just wasn’t fun anymore. He sighed.

“What do I do now? It would’ve been fine if the others were here—I could just play off of them, do whatever they don’t. But alone, it just doesn’t feel like there’s any point to doing anything.”

Contrarian cocked his head thoughtfully for a moment, then lit up like he had an idea.

“I wonder what they would do in my place?” he asked, then bounced to his feet and started stomping around with a mock-angry scowl.

“Grr. I’m the angry guy, and I say we should find the Princess and fight her forever!” he growled, then switched to his usual gait.

“Aww, but that’s so much work! We should refuse to fight her no matter what and see what happens!” he replied, then took on a slow pace and a haughty look.

“Hmph. I’m so much smarter than all of you, and I say we should ask lots of questions about the least-important details and stare at everything until we’re cross eyed,” he said before switching back again.

“But everything is so confusing, we should just ignore it all and trust our gut!” he whined, then took on a slow, precise walk.

“I think we need to ignore anything fun and just pretend we don’t care about anything,” he said in an cold and dry tone.

“But if we don’t feel anything, then what’s the difference between life and death?” he replied thoughtfully.

And so, Contrarian acted out every other Voice’s ideas and how each of them would act in his place, with his own “constructive” criticisms of their thoughts. By the end he was laughing with delight, imagining that all his friends were still around him.

But then he refocused and remembered exactly where he was and how alone he truly felt. In the end, the only thing he gained was a deep ache for his friends, like a part of his soul had been torn away and he only just now felt its absence. He was no closer to any answers about what he should do next, about what purpose he could find in these empty woods, and he slumped to the ground in despair.

But the woods weren’t quite empty, were they? The path was still here, so maybe the cabin was too. Maybe there was still a basement, and maybe it had a Princess inside—and just maybe she still needed to be slain or saved. He sighed.

“It doesn’t really matter what the others would do. They aren’t here. It’s just me, on my own, and I need to make a decision for myself. What do I want to do?”

And he realized he truly didn’t know. He didn’t really have any desires of his own; he just wanted to mess around with the other Voices and ruin the Narrator’s day. Without them, he didn’t know what to do anymore.

“Well, moping around here won’t help me figure it out any quicker. I might as well start walking…maybe then I’ll find something worth my time. Doing anything is better than doing nothing.”

And so, Contrarian hardened his resolve and set off down the path towards the cabin, in search of his own future.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hero walked down the path, with Skeptic leading the way forward and Cheated and Opportunist side-by-side behind him. That pair had tried to walk single-file, and Cheated even tried letting Opportunist go behind him as a show of trust, but he was so jumpy they both decided pairwise was better.

The two groups had bumped into each other a little ways back, and Hero had been shocked to see them together so casually. He was oddly proud to see how much they'd grown, to see the bond of trust that was forming between them. He didn't know everything they had experienced together, but something had allowed old wounds to begin healing. Hero only hoped that whatever the other missing Voices were going through, it was helping them heal too.

Suddenly, they heard a cheery whistling coming from further down the path. The Voices all looked at each other in surprise and confusion at who could be making the noise. The woods were dark and gloomy at the best of times, and few of the Voices were known for having a particularly happy disposition.

Expressions of mixed understanding and frustration flashed across their faces when Contrarian stepped around the corner and froze. Cheated seemed particularly peeved—he must still be angry about Contrarian throwing the blade out the window and getting them all killed so many times.

Personally, Hero was less concerned about old grudges and was mostly just getting ready for Contrarian to refuse to do the sensible thing and join them, just to be annoying. Hero had no plans to abandon the other Voice, however, and internally prepared himself for an argument as he smiled and waved to the other Voice.

“It's good to see another familiar face! How are you?” Hero asked, shaking Contrarian out of his surprise. Contrarian grinned widely as he looked over the group, the expression appearing surprisingly genuine for a moment—until Hero saw the mischief dancing in his eyes and had to stifle a groan.

“Oh, you know, I've been traipsing through a dark and horrible forest on my own for who knows how long. But before that I was getting murdered by a terrifying woman in dozens of new and terribly creative ways! So, I'd say I'm doing *excellently*, considering!”

Contrarian appeared to be taking this about as seriously as he did anything—that is to say, not at all. Hero just sighed, but he had to admit the other Voice's antics were warming his heart, just a little. It was nice to not have *some* happy thing in this dour forest.

“Well, us four are looking for the others. Do you want to join?” he asked.

Contrarian cocked his head to the side, a thoughtful look on his face. He even started tapping his chin with his finger, but the mischief never left his eyes. Hero knew what he was going to say before the other Voice even opened his mouth and stifled yet another groan of annoyance.

“Nah,” Contrarian finally said.

“Why you—” Cheated started, but Opportunist interrupted with a pat on the shoulder as he took a step forward.

“Well, that’s just fine by us. Come on boys, let’s get going. I’m sure he’ll be perfectly fine getting himself to the cabin alone, and we can look for the others while he waits for us,” the sly Voice said, pausing to make meaningful eye contact with the others.

Hero was confused for a moment and was about to protest when Skeptic stopped him. That’s when he realized what Opportunist was trying to do. Considering his disposition, reverse psychology might actually have a chance with Contrarian. Hero glanced at the other Voice, who merely looked unimpressed.

“I’m not an idiot, you know,” he said, one eyebrow raised. Then he shrugged, ignoring Cheated’s muttered “that’s debatable,” and continued with a wide grin.

“But I was kidding, anyway. I just wanted to see if you really wanted me to join or were just being polite. Of course I’ll help! I can keep us entertained with my commentary on the surroundings. Ooh, ooh! We could play ‘I, Spy!’ I’ll go first...”

Hero smiled to himself as the other Voice rambled on and the group resumed their hike. It was nice to have them around. He couldn’t wait until they found the others and finally got the whole group together again. For all their annoying quirks, he wouldn’t trade any of the Voices for anything in the world.

## Chapter End Notes

And here's a bonus chapter! This scene didn't feel quite right at the end of Contrarian's own chapter. Our intrepid Hero and friends met up with Opportunist and Cheated off-screen, but I wanted to include this reunion in particular.

We're now about halfway through collecting the Voices! Once that's over with, the real story can begin...



## Chapter 6

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tree roots pressed into his stomach and the stone above him was damp and smelled of rot, but Paranoid only felt the slime of eyes watching him. He'd all but buried himself under a boulder to escape their gaze, but to no avail—even the thin gap he'd slipped through left him too exposed. He could try to seal the entrance, but even exposure was better than being blind. The comfort of vision might betray him, but he'd at least see them coming.

Who “they” were, he had no idea, but he was certain *something* was watching him. Every time he shifted even slightly within his little cavern, their eyes followed. Even his breaths perked their ears, so he'd taken to only mouthing his desperate mantra of ‘heart, lungs, liver, nerves’ rather than saying it aloud.

The sudden shifting of branches, while quiet, nonetheless broke the near-silence of the forest. Paranoid held his breath at the noise and moved only his eyes as he searched for the source of the sound. The movement intensified for a few seconds before a figure stepped from between the trees.

Cold was, as always, slightly bored. He'd been wandering this forest for a while now, and nothing interesting seemed to be happening. He could always just head back to the cabin; he'd bumped into the path a few times, so he had a vague idea of where to find it again. He just didn't care to.

Whether they slew the Princess or not, it never seemed to matter, and unlike the other Voices, he didn't really have an emotional stake in whether or not the world could be saved—assuming the Narrator could even be trusted about that. It didn't really matter. Nothing ever did.

He scanned the small clearing he'd just stumbled across. In the center of it was a rather large boulder covered in moss. Cold was about to discount it as a random piece of natural scenery when he heard a faint noise.

“Get *down*!”

To his credit, Cold dropped to the ground as soon as he heard Paranoid's urging. He did not know what he was hiding from, but he recognized the other Voice who had kept them alive through their fear once. Cold trusted Paranoid, at least as much as he trusted any of the fools. But more importantly, he was curious to find out what was going on.

Cold moved, slowly and carefully, trying not to make a sound or draw unneeded attention to himself. It was dark in this part of the forest, and he figured if he moved cautiously enough, he might go unnoticed by whatever frightened the other Voice. And he seemed to be correct, as he eventually made it to the safety of the boulder without any interference. Now that Cold

was closer to the stone, he noticed a small nook beneath it, previously hidden by the shadows. Moreover, he realized the nook was not unoccupied.

“Get in, quick! Before they spot you!” Paranoid whispered, the urgency in his voice driving Cold to obey automatically once again. This was the most interesting thing to happen since his last “death” at the mirror, so he decided to play along and squeezed into the crevice that seemed just barely large enough to hold them both. Paranoid rearranged himself slightly, and in the end they were both pressed uncomfortably close together—but they were safe from whatever frightened Paranoid so much.

The two Voices silently watched the woods for a long time, searching for any sign of movement, each keeping even the noise from their breathing to a bare minimum.

After almost an hour with no sign that they had been noticed—or even that there was any other living thing in the woods—Cold started to become bored of the game. He thought they had to be safe by now, but when he glanced at Paranoid to ask what they were hiding from, he saw that the other Voice’s eyes were still wide and bloodshot, his movements jerky and panicked. From Cold’s perspective, it seemed as though the other Voice was watching threats he could not even see. Eventually, Cold decided to finally break the silence.

“I don’t see anything,” he said, so quietly he could not hear it himself. But Paranoid’s ear was pressed so close to Cold’s face that he knew the other Voice would make out his words.

“Quiet.”

That was all Paranoid said, muttered just as quietly as Cold, but much more hurried. It was as if the other Voice thought even such a soft sound could doom them both.

Cold stayed silent, pondering Paranoid’s actions. The other Voice was acting like they were under siege, as if even the slightest moment of distraction or the quietest sound would call some horrific monster upon them—but there was nothing out there. A slight breeze trickled between the tree leaves, but there was no other movement or sound. He decided to break the silence again, though his words were just as quiet.

“There’s nothing out there.”

This time, the other Voice did not respond for a long moment as he continued to stare into the woods. Eventually, he nodded once, as if he had confirmed that Cold’s words had not attracted unwanted attention, and he turned to face Cold even as his eyes continued flicking back to the trees.

“Yes, there is. I cannot see them either, but I *know* they are out there, watching us. I can feel their eyes on my skin, feel their breath on my back, hear their whispered plots. I know they are there; I’m just as certain of their existence as I am yours.”

A sudden realization began to creep its way into Cold’s mind. This Voice was constantly frightened of the world, always seeing monsters in every shadow. Cold had momentarily forgotten that fact because previously those monsters had always been quite real. But now, with no Princess to terrify him and no Voices to guide him, the same fear that was a useful

tool before now paralyzed Paranoid. There was nothing in the forest but shadows and wind—the true threat existed only in Paranoid’s mind.

Paranoid’s obsession with his own feelings trapped him in a web of fear of his own making. If only the other Voice could be more like Cold, none of this would be a problem—but Cold had tried convincing the others before, and they never listened. He did not care to try again now.

“I see. It’s all in your head. I’m not going to waste any more time here; I’m leaving,” Cold said bluntly. Paranoid’s head whipped around, his eyes blazing with fear and hurt—but more importantly, fury.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Paranoid replied, his voice containing as much conviction and wrath as he could contain in a near-silent whisper. “I don’t care if you think I’m mad or if you want to throw yourself out there and end your own existence, but you won’t drag me down with you. No, we’re stuck in this together now.”

When Cold tried to ignore the other Voice’s wishes and squeeze past Paranoid anyway, he discovered the nook was far too tight for any sort of maneuvering—Paranoid was pressed so close that neither of them would be able to leave unless the other did as well. He was trapped until Paranoid chose to let him out.

Cold was uninterested in spending the rest of time in a small cavern, so he immediately switched gears and began plotting a way out. Planning would at least keep him busy. He would need to find escape from an angle Paranoid could not block, so he tried to move his legs, to see if he could find—or make—another opening from the crevice, but to no avail. The boulder was far too heavy to even try to lift, and the more he struggled and tried to shift, the tighter it seemed to press around him, until his legs were completely encased in earth and stone and couldn’t move at all.

One of the other Voices may have panicked at this confinement, but Cold merely concluded that digging his way out was not a viable exit. He fell silent and still, focusing all of his attention and mental energy on finding another avenue of escape. There was no way to get around Paranoid, so he would have to find a way through him. While Cold was no stranger to physical confrontation, he would prefer to use that as a last resort. Not for any fear of harming the other Voice, mind, but because Paranoid could display a surprising amount of strength in his fear, and if Cold failed to force his way out, any future attempts at negotiation would be doomed to fail.

It would be trivial to feed into Paranoid’s delusions, to pretend to see the monsters in the woods, but it would be far more difficult to turn that into an escape. Paranoid seemed content to hide in this hole for eternity and would not be willing to leave if he still thought the monsters were real. So that is what Cold would have to do—he needed to convince Paranoid that the outside world was safe. That would be a near-insurmountable task, but as it stood, Cold had nothing but time.

Cold spent what felt like hours lying there, creating plans and discarding them almost as soon as they came to mind. Paranoid was fueled by his fear, so simply asking him to trust Cold would never succeed. For a similar reason, it would be unlikely that any purely logical

argument Cold might create would work; nothing he could say would address the fear at the heart of Paranoid's paralysis.

He wanted to simply ignore the other Voice's emotions as he usually would, but no matter what else he imagined trying, nothing seemed to work. It was as if denying Paranoid's feelings was doomed to failure, but Cold had no other ideas. He had no foundation for dealing with emotion; he had always thought it best practice to ignore them entirely.

Paranoid most likely *knew* his fear was illogical, but it seemed like he could not address that idea himself. Somehow, Cold would have to guide him to that realization—and the only way for him to do that would be to empathize with the other Voice. Cold had come up with the idea some time ago, but it annoyed him so much he set it aside and tried to find something, *anything* better. But no such solution came to mind, and he realized he only had the one option.

Sure, Cold could probably just fake empathy, but the other Voice was no fool. For Cold to switch suddenly from outright ridiculing emotions to pretending to have them would set the other Voice on edge immediately, and he would fail to convince the Paranoid of anything at all. No, the only way to succeed in this endeavor would be to genuinely and honestly understand what Paranoid felt and why, and to address those feelings directly.

So, for once in his existence, Cold decided to try and *feel* what someone else was going through. It should be easy—after all, the Voices had all shared a body for a long time, and he knew how Paranoid thought. When he finally decided there was simply nothing else to be done, Cold tried to put himself in Paranoid's place, and asked himself what the other Voice was feeling.

It was slow going at first, and Cold soon wanted nothing more than to abandon this experiment in disgust—before realizing that the disgust itself was a feeling, and more importantly, it was getting in his way. Why should he listen to the feeling telling him to quit, over the ones that might let him succeed?

So, he pushed onwards, trying to imagine what thoughts and emotions might be going through Paranoid's mind. How it would feel to be watched at all times, to have no ounce of privacy anywhere. To find what seemed like safety, but turned out to only be a cage, imprisoning him with his own fear. It was difficult, to imagine himself taking actions he would never dream of, to be so illogical as to fall for the ploy of flawed emotions. But eventually, he felt a small shiver creeping up the small of his back, and noticed his eyes unconsciously switch focus back to the woods around him.

He then focused on his own part in this. If he wanted to convince Paranoid, he would need to understand *all* of his feelings, including the ones caused by Cold himself. How it would feel to finally see someone else, perhaps even a small sense of comfort piercing through the veil of fear—only for that person to treat his reality with mockery. For someone he wanted to trust to say that his fears were unfounded and imaginary, and worse, to think they might be right. The guilt and shame only adding to the fear, forcing him to dig in his heels or risk confronting the possibility that he *was* insane.

Cold wanted to resist these revelations, to say that Paranoid's version of events was just another delusion. He meant no mockery, felt no pity—but clearly, Paranoid had sensed it. And that thought made something within Cold *click*.

It felt like a fog lifted from his eyes, and a sudden realization struck Cold's mind. Whose vision of reality was "correct" ultimately didn't matter, because to each of them their own version made the most sense. Paranoid would likely never believe the world was truly safe, and anything Cold said that directly refuted his sense of the world would be taken as an attack on his person.

Cold let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding and ignored Paranoid's frantic shushing. He thought he understood his unwilling companion slightly better, and his dive into emotion, if strange, may have proven helpful. Logic would fail every time because Paranoid felt he could not trust logic, so if Cold wanted to convince him of anything, he would have to address those feelings directly. And there was only one way to do that properly.

"I apologize for earlier," he whispered.

Paranoid jerked his head around in surprise and shock. If Cold had much room for humor, he might have laughed at how the other Voice's eyes appeared to bulge out of his face before they rapidly returned to Paranoid's normal wide and suspicious gaze.

"It must have hurt, for me to outright call you crazy. I shouldn't have done that," Cold continued. His voice kept its normal lack of inflection, and his tone and gaze were both level and smooth. While remaining his usual cold self would likely not help convince Paranoid he was genuine, displaying more emotion here than he ever had before would ensure that what he said would be perceived as mockery.

It seemed to be working, at least slightly; Paranoid's eyes were softening in surprise, the disbelief at Cold's words breaking through his usual barrier of distrust.

"I'm not crazy," Paranoid replied, his eyes hard when they looked back at Cold's own. He turned back to the forest, though Cold knew he was still listening.

"No, you aren't," Cold agreed. "But you have to admit, there is something not right about all of this."

Before Paranoid could open his mouth to argue, Cold pushed forward. He only had one shot at this, and he had to take advantage of surprise if he wanted to get his message through before Paranoid could dig in his heels.

"How do you know these mysterious watchers mean us harm?" Cold asked. Paranoid spared a glance at him just long enough to convey how much of an idiot he thought Cold was before turning away again. Cold continued, unimpeded.

"You say they're watching us, that they can hear our every word. If nothing else, they had to have seen my approach, assuming they didn't already know you were here. So, if they are a threat, why haven't they done anything to us?"

As the silence within the nook grew, Cold began to wonder if he'd become so quiet that the other Voice simply had not heard him. Just before he could open his mouth to repeat himself, Paranoid finally replied.

"I just do."

"You aren't stupid. You know something is wrong. If they already know where we are, then what's the point of hiding? Moreover, if they intend to hurt us, then why have they done nothing?"

He let that sink in for a moment, then continued while Paranoid sat in stunned silence.

"Those ideas are contradictory. Something must be wrong; either they don't know where we are, or they don't mean us harm. Or they don't exist. Which is it?"

Cold was pushing, trying to keep Paranoid off-balance so he was forced to listen rather than retaliate, and it was working. The other Voices stuttered and tried desperately to respond, but it was clear he had no retort. But neither could he accept that his beliefs about the world were false, so instead he said nothing.

"You expect fear and misery, and so you see it everywhere you look. You *aren't* crazy. You have very reasonable expectations of the world based on your experiences. But those expectations that once served you are betraying you now. They're keeping you trapped in the past and blinding you to the reality of your present. You need to let them go," Cold finally finished.

Paranoid finally had something to grab onto. He snorted derisively, turning away from Cold and shifting his shoulder so it was between Cold's face and his own as he replied.

"So, your advice is the same as always, I see. 'Be cold and emotionless.' Like that will solve our *very real* problems," Paranoid muttered, his emphasis indicating he still thought Cold believed him insane.

Despite his words, Cold could see a seed of doubt planted behind Paranoid's eyes. Something he'd said must have struck home. He pulled himself forward slightly until he could see Paranoid's face again.

"It's not about letting go of your emotions completely, it's about not letting them control you. Your fear *makes* the world frightening. It *creates* the monsters in the shadows." Paranoid had opened his mouth to interrupt but shut it and looked pensive when Cold said that. "And in doing so it keeps you trapped here. You don't need to be completely unfeeling; you just need to be in control."

Paranoid seemed to think about that for a minute, his eyes still scanning the woods outside the nook, though not as frantically as before. He sighed and slumped slightly.

"The Narrator mentioned something like that once. He said that the Princess changes based on our perspective of her. I wonder if the woods are the same," Paranoid said. He paused

again, then looked at Cold with something resembling hope in his eyes, concealed under a thick layer of suspicion and fear.

“Are you absolutely certain there’s nothing out there?” he asked, a hint of desperation in his voice. He wanted to believe Cold, to finally feel safe, but to do so would require distrusting himself and letting go of his entire sense of the world, built up over thousands of traumatic experiences repeated again and again. The fact that he was willing to do so at all meant some part of him must have already known, or at least suspected, that he was wrong. That did not mean it would be easy.

Cold took one last look at the forest, his face a focused mask. He scanned every tree carefully and methodically, looking over every inch he could possibly see, until at last he gave a satisfied nod.

“I am.”

Paranoid stared at him, looking for any hint of deception, but Cold’s eyes were as impassive as ever. The other Voice finally relaxed and shifted out of the way, giving Cold the space to squeeze past him and out of their cramped shelter.

Cold stood, stretching his sore muscles as he looked around once more. Nothing seemed to move or react to his presence in any way, just as he expected, but it was good to confirm. He nodded once to himself.

“Come along, I remember the way back to the path. Then we can go back to the cabin together and see if the Princess is still there,” Cold said.

But as he took a few steps from the boulder, he quickly realized that Paranoid was not following. He turned to see the other Voice standing just outside of the nook—though standing was perhaps a stretch.

He was frozen in a crouch, his eyes wide with terror and frantically rolling within his skull as his whole body rattled and shook. It was impossible to find the line between the shakes caused by his panicked breathing and those of his tremors. Leaving the shelter of the boulder must have been too much, too quickly, and he was in no state to move any further.

Cold sighed quietly in exasperation, then moved to stand in front of Paranoid. He gently grabbed the other Voice by the sides of his head and pulled him up until he was eye level with Cold, though his eyes were unfocused and never stayed still for more than a moment.

“Look at me,” was all he said, his face mere inches from Paranoid’s own.

Agonizingly slowly, the other Voice’s eyes refocused until he stared at Cold’s face. His breathing eventually settled, and his tremors gradually ceased, until finally his panic attack was over. Paranoid’s face was full of confusion and surprise as he stared at Cold, who’s own face carried only faint impatience, one raised eyebrow seeming to ask, “are you done now?”

All at once, Paranoid leaned forward and fell as if his strings had been cut, collapsing in a heap atop Cold. All the fear and anxiety that previously kept him moving had disappeared,

only to be replaced with exhaustion. Cold stared incredulously at the faintly snoring Voice whose head rested atop his chest, then sighed and rubbed his temples in frustration.

He contemplated leaving for a moment but decided against it; he knew precisely how boring this forest was on his own, and Paranoid was the only other Voice he'd found. So instead, Cold merely sighed once more and tried futilely to get comfortable, closing his eyes in an attempt to get some rest of his own.

With the only conscious Voice distracted as he was, he failed to notice a single pale, slender arm silently extend itself from the boulder they had only just been hiding beneath. It reached slowly towards the pair with a hand open as if to caress something—or perhaps to grab it. Paranoid suddenly shifted in his sleep as if sensing the approach of an unknown terror, and the arm froze.

When the Voice appeared to return to his sleep, the arm redirected its advance into the shadow of the crevice before pulling out a single black feather, lost by the Voices as they scrambled from the boulder. Its prize found, the arm withdrew into the solid stone without a trace, both Voices none the wiser.

Finally, the forest was almost silent. Nothing moved but the leaves blowing in a nonexistent breeze, and nothing stirred in the darkness but the stars that twinkled like blinking eyes.

## Chapter End Notes

What was that noise?

...

I'm sure it was nothing.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

Content Warning: suicidal thoughts

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

Stubborn growled as he ripped and tore through the forest, his claws slashing through the thick branches and dense foliage that blocked his route and tried to halt his progress. He tried to shove past them, but his struggles snapped a branch high above him and released heavy vines that wrapped around his body and pulled him to the ground. He writhed futilely there for a while, trying to disentangle himself from the makeshift net, but his resistance only seemed to further trap him, until finally he started simply gnawing at the plants in a fury.

Eventually, he managed to free himself, but his efforts had dropped him down a short hill and pulled him far from his path. Here, slick mud caked his feet and thick roots and heavy rocks jutted from the ground. He could not see more than a few feet around himself, the dark and heavy greenery pressing in around him from all sides, almost claustrophobically close. He shoved his way forward once again.

It didn't really matter how far he was from his path, or how the dense foliage prevented him from navigating anywhere, since he had no real destination in mind. Stubborn had wandered into the forest to take a more challenging path than the "easy" road he was used to and had quickly discovered that the woods were all too willing to provide him with the challenge he sought. He'd spent hours battling vines, trees, and rocks in his attempts to get back to the path, but it oddly seemed as though he didn't move anywhere. Sure, he'd take a fall down a hill occasionally—though he never noticed climbing up at all—but nothing ever seemed to change.

He roared as he charged forward, the trees around him echoing with the sound of his rage and pent-up frustration at the world and at this disgrace of a battle. He only made it a few steps before he tripped over a root he could've sworn wasn't there a moment ago, his face slamming into the cold mud and his frustrated energy draining in an instant. He lay there a moment, breathing heavily, before sighing as he pushed himself back to his feet.

He'd realized long ago that something was wrong with this war, but he had no idea what. He once thought he would've loved this kind of fight: faced with an endlessly powerful opponent, with no choices or hard decisions beyond the fight itself, and nothing to do but keep fighting until he could no longer. It was everything he wanted, and yet Stubborn was unsatisfied—in fact, he was miserable.

What was different about this fight? His battles against the Princess had been much the same, and yet he cherished even the memories of those endless conflicts. He'd fought her when she

was as indomitably strong as the forest, yet he enjoyed the challenge. The battles with her had sometimes gone on longer than his current brawl, yet at the time he was glad for the lack of respite. Try as he might to think amidst his efforts to resist the suffocating presence of the forest, he could not find even a single source for his dissatisfaction.

Something was missing, that was all he knew. All his struggles seemed to come to naught, and it felt *wrong*. The hollow feeling in his chest almost reminded him of—

Of her. Old memories rose unbidden from dark and hidden corners of his mind. The Princess they had all feared and hated. They had fought this Princess again and again, trying every path they could think of to keep her contained, and in the end, it was all in vain. In the end, they had no room left to struggle as the many paths they tried to walk faded away, leaving only the one where they freed her.

That is the feeling he'd been struggling to source. After their last death, when their options were all gone, and they were forced to walk the singular remaining path—that is what this fight felt like. When all the Voices had run out of fight and struggle and they'd tried everything they could think of, and still had to walk with grim resignation to a fate they could no longer avoid.

Stubborn was forced to pause his advance through the woods as the idea rocked his mind, his eyes widening in sudden realization. This fight with the forest offered no room to grow or ways to adapt; it was nothing more than him staving off an inevitability. He had no chance of victory or time to savor defeat. *That* was why he hated this fight so much—while he was fighting for his life, the forest was not. It was merely suffocating him, choking both the life and spirit from his body, crushing him like he might a particularly hardy bug. It was less a battle against a worthy opponent and more a desperate attempt to fight a natural law of the world; he could grow no more from battling this forest than he could from fighting the relentless pull of gravity.

But what could he do? Whether he stopped or kept fighting was moot; the forest would crush him regardless. He could try to find the main path, but there was no way to navigate and he was on the verge of collapsing from exhaustion.

He considered ending it all himself, to both make his death quick and spitefully deny the forest the pleasure of victory. There were plenty of vines that he well knew were strong enough to hold his weight, and the trees that stretched high above him offered more than enough room for a short drop. The only thing that stopped Stubborn from following that idea to its conclusion was a single thought: *the forest doesn't want me dead*.

As far as he could tell, that insight was true. The woods only started fighting him when it became clear he would not return to the path, and he could somehow sense that it only wanted him gone. Killing himself would not deny the woods anything, and he was not yet so desperate for escape that he would end it all himself.

As the trees around him groaned their displeasure and pressed inwards towards him, he chuckled to himself.

“I know. I want to be out of here just as much as you want me gone, but it doesn’t really look like I’ve got a way out. I don’t suppose I could just ask you to let me leave, could I?” he asked, mostly to himself.

He had started to resume his fight against the woods when Stubborn finally understood his own words and he froze again. The forest didn’t really want to fight or kill him, it just wanted to force him to leave, so if he asked...maybe it would let him.

A spark of pride and rage flashed up inside him, furious at the idea of simply giving up, but it was quickly snuffed by the tired despair that suffused the rest of his soul. He had long run out of fuel for his once-fiery passion and now just wanted to leave, pride be damned.

Stubborn stood tall for the first time in hours and closed his eyes as he took a deep breath. It had been a long time since he’d allowed himself even a moment’s rest, and his aching muscles were politely informing him that it was long overdue. He released his breath slowly, then took another, ignoring the building pressure of the forest around him. If he was going to bow out of this fight, Stubborn wanted to do it properly—no frantic begging or desperate gasps for air from this Voice.

His breath caught and heart rate slowed, he opened his eyes, unsurprised to see how close the forest had gotten. Mere moments ago, he could reach his arms out almost unconfined, but now the trees and foliage of the woods were almost suffocatingly close. He ignored it as he opened his mouth to speak.

“Alright, I’m done. I’m ready to leave,” he said. His voice was as loud and gruff as always, but the surrounding foliage seemed to muffle it to silence only a few feet away.

The forest did not respond of course, but he didn’t expect it to. He waited a few moments for something to happen, for the unrelenting pressure of the forest to cease or for some other subtle shift that confirmed it had heard his message.

But no such change occurred. And as the forest continued to press inwards towards him, Stubborn began to grow uneasy. Perhaps it couldn’t understand him, or...perhaps he misunderstood its intent. Maybe the forest really did seek his destruction.

“Didn’t you hear me? I concede!” he shouted again, his noble and proud façade gone and replaced with the frantic fear that now filled his mind.

This was his last idea, the only option he could think of. He was tired of fighting for mere survival, and unless the woods allowed him freedom then he would never find his way out. If the forest did not accept his surrender, then he was well and truly doomed.

Unbidden, the face of the Princess flashed in his mind. She was a good opponent, always pushing the Voices, always forcing them to grow and adapt. She never let them become complacent, but it seemed he was the only Voice to appreciate that fact. Sometimes, she even seemed to share his passion, his desire to fight and claw towards betterment, and wanted them to join her in beautiful eternal combat. On rare occasions, the man in charge would even agree, and they’d stay there together, locked in battle until the world fell apart. Those were good times, and great fights. He missed her.

And he missed his brothers, the Voices, his companions through thick and thin. Sure, some—or most—of them were insufferable, wasting time thinking or scheming when the only thing they needed out of life was *right there*, ready to be challenged and fought. But they were the closest thing he had to a family, and he ached to see them again. He wondered where they were. Were the others in this same forest, being slowly crushed by the world, waiting for it all to end? A spark of terror lit in his heart. What if some of them had already fallen? What if he was the only one of the Voices left alive?

Rage joined the fear burning within his soul. He raged at the forest that dared trap him, he raged at the world for separating the Voices, and he raged at himself for wasting time standing here, doing *nothing*, when his brothers could be in danger. The fire inside him grew into an inferno of passion he'd not felt since entering these accursed woods, one he'd thought had been forever extinguished. He would not let this forest crush him. Not while he still breathed.

But then the fire dimmed and shrunk as despair crept back into his soul. Stubborn had been fighting for hours; the whole reason he had tried to concede was because he could fight no longer. Then he thought of the Voices he needed to find, the Princess he wanted to fight, and the inferno roared back to life.

Once, long ago, he had fought to grow, to struggle and become better through that struggle. That ideal, that *need* to grow stronger, had been the fuel for his passion and had kept him moving long after he should have fallen. That ideal had been lost and forgotten during his time in the forest, and he began to fight for the sake of fighting, with no real goal at all. And as he weakened and his lust for battle waned, he began to fight for mere survival.

But now, he had a true reason to live and fight again. It was like a fog had lifted from his mind, and he felt like himself for the first time since that damned mirror took him away from his brothers. He would find the other Voices, and he would do whatever it took to ensure their safety.

And if this stupid forest wanted to get in his way, he would burn it to the ground.

His eyes blazed with a passion that filled his every movement, and the lethargy that tried to pull his limbs to the ground, demanding that he rest, burned away into nothing. He tore at the vines that wrapped themselves around his body while he had stood frozen and roared a challenge to the forest.

“I don’t know why you won’t let me leave, but I’m not just gonna take it! I’m gonna find my brothers, and if I have to pull you up, root and stem, to do it, then I will!”

As the echoes from his shout faded from the woods around him, Stubborn realized something had finally changed. The forest, that had once seemed so dark and alive with malice, now stood still. The pressure that sought to crush the life from his body was gone, and the vines that had coiled like snakes around him during his few seconds of distraction now sat limp in his hands. The shock was enough to settle the fire in his belly, just for a moment, and he stared in awe at the world around him.

A gentle gust of wind danced through the leaves, and the movement caught his eye. He could see a small gap in the wall of trees and vines and other plants that surrounded him, and beyond that gap was a small trail. He walked to it confidently. Somehow, he knew it would lead back to the main path, and from there, to the other Voices. The forest had finally given him what he sought—an escape. For all his fire and bluster, he hadn't even needed to fight for it.

Before he could step onto the trail, however, an idea rose to his mind that made him laugh aloud. It was a harsh sound, full of gravel, but nonetheless the forest resounded with the sound of his joy for a moment before he collected himself.

The Stubborn now standing in the woods was no longer the same Voice who had walked into it so long ago. Before his battle with the woods, Stubborn would never have considered conceding a fight, no matter how deep into despair he had sunk—and yet, he had done just that. He had lost himself, forgotten who he was, and then rediscovered it, and even learned some on the way.

In other words, he had grown. He got what he wanted out of his fight with the forest after all, and it was that thought that had made him laugh and smile so. He turned to the forest and spoke, one last time.

“I guess I won something from you after all. Thanks for the lesson, and the fight; I won't forget either. These scars will see to that!”

As the echo of his shout faded from the trees, he turned and sprinted down the forest's trail. While once it sat heavy and dark upon him, now the woods seemed almost bright. The shadows that once held doom were lighter, and the brush of leaves against his skin seemed more a comfort than an assault. The path before him was smooth and soft, and with every step forward Stubborn's smile grew only wider.

Far, far behind the Voice was the edge of the forest. Here, the world was...wrong. Trees rippled like water before shattering like stone, or melted like wax beneath their own weight while they grew to fill the sky. The world twisted and heaved, and the ground became the sky became the sea became nothing at all, became everything at once. At this edge of the forest, the world was always ending.

And then it started ending faster.

## Chapter End Notes

Man, this was a tough one! The next one will be hard too; I don't have much already written from it or much of a plan beyond a very loose idea, so I'll be starting basically from scratch. After that though, things should be pretty quick, since I have literally the rest of the fic written and just need to polish things.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shadows filled the air like smoke and crept along the forest floor like a thick and toxic oil. No breeze shook the withered and shrunken foliage that hung from twisted trees, yet the air carried the kind of heavy chill that threatened to sink into one's bones and took hours of warmth to coax away.

From this corpse of a forest crawled a low moan that, despite its near-silence, hung in the air with a sorrowful weight before trailing off. The source of the groan shivered and sobbed to himself from the muddy pit where he lay, unable to move from where he had fallen hours ago.

Broken was technically unconfined; it was physically possible for him to raise himself out of the mud that soaked into his meager feathers and carry on stumbling through the woods like he had before he slipped and fell. He simply lacked the will to do any such thing. Instead, he sobbed and groaned where he lay and ignored how the mud inched its way higher and higher up his body as he sank. If he dropped beneath the surface and was utterly consumed by the earth, such was no more than his fate, he believed.

Broken was alone, completely and utterly. He had been ripped from the other Voices at the mirror, pulled away by unseen hands, and now he lay in an unfamiliar forest and was *alone* with only his own thoughts to hurt him. And hurt him his thoughts did, as he stewed in the memories of every awful thing that ever happened to him and every horrible thing he'd ever done.

Needless to say, those reminders of pain and misery were abundant.

The only time he could recall being anything even resembling happy was with *her*. The goddess who made even the Narrator bow to her presence, whose radiance knew no bounds. Yet even those memories were tainted by anguish; only rarely when they discovered her majesty did they supplicate themselves as they should have. More often he was forced to betray the others, to turn their blade against themselves. Even then, he often failed, and in an utter rejection of the natural order, the others managed to cut down the goddess.

So many times, he had betrayed his kin. So many times, he had failed to save the one to whom he'd pledged undying devotion. He was nothing but a pathetic, worthless failure and traitor and scum and filth and—

Broken's endless spiral of misery and self-loathing was interrupted by a sound so strange and out of place that it took him far longer than it should have to place it. Someone off in the distance was singing, some cheery tune whose words he couldn't quite make out through the trees. At first, Broken simply ignored it, assuming that he was merely hallucinating the sound, that his mental state had just deteriorated to the point that he couldn't even rely on his

own senses. But as he began to sob to himself once more, the singing abruptly cut off, though it was soon replaced by a voice of insufferable pride and nobility calling out.

“Hello? Is that one of my brethren I hear crying? Never fear! I shall find you in this forest yet!”

Broken should have known the singing belonged to one of his fellow Voices. Based on the tone, he even knew who it was; there were only a few of his kin who could have stayed even remotely cheery in a place so dark as this.

He could now clearly hear Smitten stomping through the woods, but it wouldn’t matter. He doubted the romantic fool would be able to find him in the dark and Broken had no intention of calling out to the other Voice to aid his search. The world had decreed that Broken should be alone, and so alone he would remain. The mud crept further up Broken’s body.

Yet despite Broken’s cynicism, the sound of Smitten’s footsteps only grew closer, until finally the other Voice stood just beside Broken’s little pit of mud. He tried to turn away and conceal himself, but his efforts were in vain: Smitten had found him.

“Come, my brother! Let’s get you out of this wicked forest and back to the path. We have a Princess to save, after all!” he crowed. Broken only glanced at the other Voice for a moment before deciding he had gone mad from his one-sided longing for the Princess. That was the only explanation he could imagine for Smitten’s overwhelming confidence in this awful place. Perhaps he simply hadn’t noticed how different the world was after the Voices were stolen away at the mirror.

Until Smitten arrived, Broken assumed he was completely alone in the world; there was no one making the decisions and no Narrator giving orders in his ears. Just him, alone in the woods. So what made the love-struck idiot believe that the Princess was still around, besides his buffoonish confidence?

Some amount of his doubt must have been visible on Broken’s face, which was unsurprising considering he wasn’t trying to hide it. Regardless, Smitten only gave a knowing smile.

“You should know better than to doubt me when it comes to matters of love, my friend! Listen to your heart, and I’m sure its beat will agree with mine: the Princess yet lives! We need only find her, and our story will be complete, happy ending and all!” Smitten cried.

Broken wanted nothing more than to ignore the fool, but something in his overconfident words rang true. If the two of them were still around, it only made sense that the Princess was too.

“How wonderful,” he muttered under his breath. Broken had mixed feelings about the revelation. Some part of him was overjoyed, and it demanded that he throw himself down at the feet of his goddess and beg for forgiveness for his failings—forgiveness he knew he did not deserve. But mostly he had no desire to seek out the source of his misery. He would rather simply wait until the mud consumed him and his suffering was put to an end.

Unfortunately, Smitten managed to hear Broken's muttered comment, and as dense as he was, failed to realize the sarcastic tone. The love-struck Voice beamed a smile wide enough it threatened to dispel the thick shadows that still cloaked the surrounding forest.

"Indeed it is, my friend! Now, let us be off! We must find our lover immediately!"

Smitten marched off into the woods, taking a few good strides before realizing that Broken had not followed him. He turned and strode back to the pit, a puzzled look on his face.

"What's the matter, my friend? Are you stuck?" he asked. Broken only glared at him, then pried himself out of the muck, wincing as the thick sludge pulled a few feathers loose from his skin. Smitten brightened again momentarily, until Broken turned his back on the other Voice and flopped onto his side, sinking back into the soft mud. Smitten may have been distracted earlier with thoughts of the Princess, but now his full attention lay solely on Broken.

"Please, my brother. Share your plights with me; what troubles you so?" Smitten asked once more as he crouched beside the mud, his tone having lost some of his usual pride, replaced with genuine concern.

"I was alone, until you arrived," Broken spat. He intended it as an accusation and a demand to be left to his solitude once again, yet based on how he nodded in perceived understanding, Smitten did not recognize such a subtle shift. Broken wondered if this was his new torture, his fresh hell.

"It doesn't feel right without the others, does it? Having our own bodies is nice, I suppose, but I do miss our erstwhile companions. I feared I was completely alone, until I heard you and found you here. How I missed hearing another's voice. The joy your mere presence brings me is like a light illuminating the darkness of these woods!"

Broken could not convey any more disinterest if he shouted it into Smitten's ear. The other Voice prattled on, unnoticing.

"You are alone no longer, my friend. But it seems that is not the only thing on your mind. Your solitude is over, and the Princess awaits her rescue. What more could you ask for, to spark a fire in that grim heart of yours?"

Broken felt a growing tension in his chest with every one of Smitten's words, and as he mentioned the Princess yet again, something finally snapped. All of his dull and icy sorrow suddenly thawed, and words dripped like poison from his tongue.

"You think she loves you, but answer this: what kind of love hurts so much?"

"What?" was all Smitten could say in reply, confused at the apparent non sequitur.

"You heard me," Broken said, an ounce of fire touching his voice. "How can you say she loves us when she takes such joy in our pain? You and I both know it's true, or have you forgotten how she cut us to ribbons? How she trapped us in an endless loop of torture and death? How she enjoyed every moment of it?"



“That’s—” Smitten began, but Broken did not give him the chance to speak.

“I sacrificed *everything* for her. And look at what has become of me; look at what her ‘love’ really means.”

Broken’s spiteful anger was replaced with desperate tears as he begged, *pleaded* with Smitten to understand, to see what he saw: a wretched creature, unworthy of anything but disgust.

“Wait—”

“She *hurts* us, brother. How can you call that love?” he finished. He watched Smitten’s face carefully for a moment, hoping desperately for some rebuttal. Smitten only stared at him, a mixture of fury and shocked betrayal in his eyes. He stuttered and stumbled over his words for a moment, trying to find something, anything, to refute Broken’s claims.

But he found nothing.

When no response came, Broken slumped back into the mud, all his vigor squeezed from his body and into his words. Smitten barely managed to pull himself together and mutter some resigned accusation of cold-heartedness before stumbling back into the woods, leaving Broken alone once again with his thoughts.

Smitten collapsed onto the ground only a few steps away, just out of sight of Broken’s pit. He couldn’t stand the thought of seeing or being seen by the other Voice, whose horrible words still echoed in his mind.

How could Broken be so cruel, to say such hurtful things? Such terrible lies about the Princess whom they loved. And for all that Broken had said, Smitten was certain the Princess loved them all in turn.

What did it matter that she hurt them? It was always necessary, either because they tried to prevent her escape or because they deserved punishment for killing her; all the pain they’d suffered at her hands was justified. Now that they were free of the evil Narrator and his whispered words of doom that tempted them to abandon the path of love, they could finally be with the Princess. Every harm they’d suffered at the hands of the other would finally be worth it.

But some echo of Broken’s words could not be shaken off so easily, and Smitten had to wonder about the other Voice’s nature. They’d met so rarely on the twisting paths of fate which led them through the woods, and the few times the two of them had encountered each other, all of the Voices had been somewhat damaged by the long road they’d walked. Now that they were free, Smitten had not expected his sole companion to be so...down.

What had the other Voice been through, to be so deeply muddled in the waters of despair, Smitten wondered. He thought back to Broken’s appearance, which he had previously ignored. In his mind’s eye, he finally noticed the plucked and damaged feathers that left bare patches of skin, marred with thin scars along his body and throat. It looked like whole pieces of Broken’s flesh had been carved from him and the wounds had only just now healed.

What could have injured his brother so severely? What hurt him so deeply that even now he wept from within a pit of mud?

Some part of Smitten knew the answer, though he did not want to accept it. Yet in his heart, Smitten was forced to recognize that there was only one possible answer: the Princess. Somehow, she was to blame for his brother's misery. What could he have done to earn such ire from her?

Smitten tried desperately to justify it, to find some solution that maintained both his love and the reality he now was forced to recognize, but finally he came to the only possible answer: nothing.

There was no deed any of the Voices could ever have possibly done to have earned such abuse, that left one of them drowning in filth and despair even with her gone. No creature deserved such pain, no matter what he'd done.

...What kind of love, indeed.

How could he claim they held the Princess's love, while his brother lay abused and broken just a few steps away? And how could he say that he loved her, when she dealt such pain to him and his brothers. Was he a lover fighting desperately to save his beloved, or naught but a moth drawn to flame no matter how it burned?

That thought broke whatever block kept such awful ideas at bay, and Smitten's mind began to race as he called into question every meeting he'd ever had with the Princess, every word she'd ever spoken.

Did the Princess ever truly love him, or was that simply a convenient lie he'd told himself to excuse the pain? Or worse, was it a lie she'd told them herself, to secure her own freedom? In some of her incarnations, the Princess had proven herself to be sly and conniving. Could it have all been a trick he was just foolish enough to believe?

How could he have been such a fool, to miss it all before?

There in the darkness, Smitten wept. He wept for the brothers he had betrayed for love, for the dream of a Princess he had now awoken from, and he wept for himself, sitting in the mud beneath a tree.

And the shadows grew ever darker.

...

A fresh chill seeped into Broken's bones. The forest felt colder and emptier since Smitten had left, though Broken knew it had not changed from before the other Voice arrived. Smitten had simply warmed the air somewhat with his presence, was all. The cold was still better than Smitten's incessant platitudes and constant rambling about the Princess.

Broken shivered slightly in the cold mud.

It was awful to have pushed the other Voice away so cruelly, he knew. He didn't deserve Smitten's kindness. The other Voice had only tried to lift his spirits, and this was how Broken repaid him. The one Voice who didn't yet hate him now most certainly did. He could just make out the sound of Smitten's sobs from just behind a tree, almost echoing his own despair. To be so faithful to another, only to have the veil of devotion ripped away and be confronted with a cold and cruel reality...it reminded Broken of himself.

Which meant that now Broken was the monster, tormenting another for nothing more than cruelty's sake. Just a traitor, hurting his only companion for worthless reasons yet again. It didn't matter his intentions, that he couldn't stand how Smitten's voice reminded him of himself. How another's joy only deepened his own pain. He really was nothing more than a cruel and spiteful beast.

It wasn't right. He was drowning in his own despair; how could he pull another victim down with him? It wasn't like he could climb out of this pit on the body of another; Broken was already doomed.

But perhaps Smitten wasn't. Perhaps he could save this other condemned soul, before he sank too deep into the mud to ever resurface. Broken's pain was his alone; it was wrong to have pulled Smitten into it.

And at that thought, some core piece of Broken snapped. He had done so many awful things in his existence, but this was a bridge too far. Before now, every awful thing he had done to this point was in the name of the Princess, and he could excuse his betrayals as mere weakness. But his cruelty to Smitten was his own; no coercion, no goddess to put the idea into his head. Just Broken and his own nature.

And that nature was unacceptable. He had to make his actions right.

His mind made up, the Voice slowly pulled himself free from the sucking mud, losing a few more feathers in the process, and slowly stumbled his way over to where Smitten had fled. He would give the other Voice the kindness he knew he did not himself deserve. He could never be forgiven for his actions to the other Voices, for his many betrayals, but perhaps he could heal the pain he had caused this one. Broken could only hope it was not too late.

...

"I'm sorry," Broken began. In the few steps it took to reach Smitten he had planned out his words, how he would call himself a liar, how he would say that his earlier remarks were just an attempt to lash out at Smitten's happiness. He hoped it would be enough, but he didn't make it past the first two words before Smitten interrupted him.

"Don't be. You were right."

"What?"

Broken may have sounded confused, but in truth his reaction was nothing but surprise. Internally, he knew exactly what was happening: he was too late. Smitten had already sunk to the depths of despair, and neither of them would be able to escape.

“You were right,” Smitten repeated. “True love shouldn’t hurt so deeply. It was all nothing more than a lie; a hopeful deception on my part, and a convenient untruth on her own.”

Broken didn’t know what to do. His script, the only thing that gave him the confidence to say anything at all, no longer worked. He just stood there, mouth slightly ajar, watching as his last chance for even the slightest redemption crumbled into nothing.

Smitten was folded into himself, his feathers ruffled and out of place and the brightness in his eyes gone. He looked nothing like the proud, confident Voice who had come strolling by Broken’s pit just a little while ago. In fact, he looked a good deal like Broken himself.

Broken shook himself out of his stupor. He couldn’t let Smitten become like him. He had to do something, anything. He crouched down beside the fallen Voice and hesitantly reached out an arm, almost flinching as he touched Smitten’s shoulder, but eventually managing to wrap it around the other Voice, pulling him into something resembling a hug.

“I don’t think it was all fake,” he said, his voice just barely above a whisper. His mind drifted to a particular Princess, kind and gentle despite all they had done to each other. How when they were together, everything felt...good. How all the pain seemed so *distant*. Even when they chose to focus on the faded memories of pain and anger, she still only seemed to regret the misery she’d caused.

Perhaps that wasn’t love, but it wasn’t hate either. That was enough for Broken. He channeled his memories of that Princess, tried to emulate her kindness and forgiveness in his voice as he spoke to Smitten. He tried to say the words he would have wanted to hear, were he in Smitten’s place.

“Sometimes, she was cruel. I know that better than any of us. But that doesn’t mean she was all bad.”

Smitten only turned his head away, refusing to look at Broken or hear his words. His mind was still racing, his thoughts spiraling out of control and plummeting to the darkest depths he could conceive of. Every interaction with the Princess he’d ever witnessed was called into question, every word he’d ever heard her speak. All he could think of was every harm she’d ever caused them; all he could see was the spite behind her eyes as she killed them once again. Blinded by his love, his devotion, he had missed so many signs. How could he think she might love them, even after every time she hurt them?

Broken thought frantically, trying to find the right words to save his fellow Voice, but none came. There were no words that could pull Smitten from his despair, just as there were none that could pull Broken from his own.

Instead, he held his brother tightly, refusing to let him go, refusing to let him feel alone.

The two Voices sat in silence for a while, each dwelling both on their own pain, and the pain of the other. Finally, Smitten broke the silence with a question.

“What did she do to you?”

He turned to face Broken for the first time since he fled what felt like forever ago, back when there was still hope in his heart. Smitten gazed with sorrow in his eyes at his companion, his pain mirrored in Broken's own.

"No more than I deserved," Broken replied.

Smitten shook his head in denial.

"That's not true."

"You don't know what she—" Broken began, before stopping himself. The Princess may have given him the orders, but he chose to follow them. The blame for his actions lay solely on himself. "You don't know what I did," he said instead.

"I don't need to," was all Smitten replied. "There is nothing you could have done to deserve such hurt."

"You don't understand," Broken said. He didn't know why he was so desperate to make Smitten grasp his evil, to make him see Broken for what he truly was. To be judged by another as unworthy as he knew himself to be. Still, the words were hard to force out; some part of him wanted to maintain the façade of goodness that seemed to have fooled his companion; another lie, another betrayal to add to the list.

"I'm—I'm a traitor," Broken continued. "I tried to k-kill us. Sometimes I succeeded. I'm a monster."

He took a shuddering, sobbing breath, not meeting Smitten's eyes. He could imagine the accusatory gaze well enough. Instead, Broken looked at his hands; the plucked feathers and damaged scales, the thick mud that still clung to his form, the deep set and largely self-inflicted scars. That was all he was: self-destructive and damaged. He was Broken, and he knew it.

"So that's what you meant when you said you'd 'sacrificed everything,'" Smitten muttered.

Before Broken could return to the despair that he had only barely managed to pull himself out of, he was interrupted by Smitten leaning further into his chest and grabbing hold of his loose hand. Before Broken could pull away, the other Voice placed both of their hands on his own chest, just above Smitten's heart. Broken could feel the beat of the other Voice's heart, still strong and proud despite his sorrow. But he could feel something else as well.

"Do you feel that scar? That came from our blade. After the others murdered our beloved—" Smitten caught himself then, wincing in pain before pushing on. "—Murdered the Princess, I took the blade and drove it into our own traitorous heart in a fury."

Broken looked up at Smitten then, and rather than the accusations he expected, he saw only acceptance and love in the other Voice's eyes.

"If you are a traitor, then I am too. But neither of us deserve this pain for our misdeeds; we've both suffered long enough."

Broken remained unconvinced. He knew what he was, and he knew what he deserved. But he supposed the words were nice to hear at least, even if he could not entirely believe them.

Smitten nudged Broken and smiled at him with pride as he continued.

“Besides, you pulled yourself out of that pit just to come over here and comfort me. Helping someone even when it’s hard—that’s not the action of a monster. Why, I’d even call it quite heroic!”

Smitten thought for a moment, then stood suddenly. Broken was too surprised at the movement to react and found himself pulled up alongside the other Voice, their arms still loosely wrapped around each other.

“Thank you, my brother. I believe you’ve saved me,” Smitten said.

Broken couldn’t understand what the other Voice was saying. How could he have saved Smitten? He had barely done anything; he’d assumed that he had failed miserably yet again. His confusion must have been clearly written on his face, because Smitten explained.

“You reminded me that there’s more to our existence than the Princess. I know not whether she truly loves us or whether it was all a ploy, but I do know this: our brothers are out there somewhere, and they may need us like I needed you now. So come! Let us find our brethren. And perhaps then we can find the Princess and learn the truth of the matter, once and for all.”

Smitten recalled the gentle kiss he’d shared with the Princess, still so fresh in his mind that if he closed his eyes, he could pretend it had never ended. He wanted to believe it was genuine, that his feelings were truly shared. But his eyes were open now. For the first time in his life, blind devotion was not enough to hold his faith. He would find the Princess, and learn the truth, now that neither of them were imprisoned by cruel fate.

Broken wanted to argue, wanted to stay here with his punishment, but the way Smitten’s arm tightened around his side made it clear that the other Voice was going nowhere without him. He was tempted to stay regardless, to let his misery drown them both, but finally he gave a resigned nod and the two Voices set off to find the others.

While he was still filled with agony at his current existence, Broken had to admit that it was nice to have company. And perhaps one day he would believe that he deserved that kindness.

## Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long! Life suddenly happened, work ate all my free time and energy, and despite finishing an early attempt at this chapter weeks ago I had a much better idea for it and had to rewrite it from scratch. And I'm so glad I did! This version is way better than the original.

Anyway! We have one more Voice yet to find: the Voice of the Hunted! I'm sure he's having a wonderful time in the woods by himself. This is gonna be a piece of cake; how

long could it possibly take to find him? After all, \*every single\* other Voice is looking for him.

Side note: I have no idea what tags are appropriate for this story so far, so if you feel like I'm missing something, please let me know in the comments and I'll take it into consideration. Does this qualify as angst? I've no clue.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He tore through the forest as fast as he could, ducking beneath low branches and leaping over toppled logs, yet he could still hear his pursuer in the distance far behind him. It wasn't a fast beast. It was too large and had too many limbs to maneuver swiftly through the narrow spaces between the trees. Unfortunately for Hunted, it didn't need to be fast. Any time he thought he'd escaped the monster, or slowed to catch his breath, he would soon hear it just behind him. It never seemed close, but neither was it far away: just out of sight but never out of mind.

It called to him in a dozen voices, familiar yet twisted, the sounds distorted like an image beneath water. It sometimes claimed friendship, offered safety, or simply begged for him to slow down, but he always ignored it. He did not know what the creature was, but he refused to heed its calls. He refused to let it catch him.

He pressed onwards, ignoring the burning in his chest and the heartbeat pounding in his head. If he could just keep running, maybe he could escape the beast pursuing him.

His sprint brought him to a deep gully, and he barely stopped himself before he fell into it. The trench carved the land into jagged halves and stretched off as far as he could see, a small trickle of water flowing at the bottom. It was not so wide or steep that it was impassable, but just enough that it would certainly hinder the ungainly creature behind him. He took a few steps back and leapt across, continuing his run.

The monster was large and slow compared to him and would require time to climb across the gully, time he could use to catch his breath for a few minutes.

This was not the first time an obstacle had allowed Hunted to put real distance between him and the beast that chased him. That first time, he had kept running, as far and as fast as he could, hoping desperately that the delay would be enough for the creature to lose him. When he finally paused to rest, he practically collapsed from exhaustion and lay on the ground for what felt like hours, only to despair when he realized that he could still hear the beast off in the distance, charging through the woods.

That was the last time he paused for more than a few minutes.

Another time, he rested for as brief a moment as possible before silently creeping away, trying to leave no trace of his passage, in hopes the monster would lose his trail. Yet all-too soon he heard the beast behind him once again.

No matter what he did, no matter how fast he ran or how carefully he crawled, nothing seemed to ever make the beast lose track of him. Still, he had no choice but to keep trying. Perhaps this time, the beast would lose his trail, or it would finally run out of stamina and be left behind.



Once he was far enough from the gully that he could no longer hear the creature in the distance, he slowed to a stop and just barely kept from collapsing on the ground in exhaustion. He knew that if he allowed himself to fully relax, he would not have the energy to get back up again, so instead he merely leaned against a tree. He pressed his head so firmly against the bark that he half expected to start bleeding, and he took deep, shuddering breaths, trying to quiet the heartbeat that boomed like a drum in his ears.

He glanced back at his path and was pleased at how little of a trail he'd left, despite his pace. The occasional scratch in the soil or broken tree branch gave away his route, but only because he knew where to look. He didn't think it would be enough to keep the creature from tracking him, but it certainly couldn't hurt.

He knew he could not run forever. The many failed attempts to escape from the Princess had proven more than enough times that running *didn't work*. They had only ever survived when they had a plan, when they had a way to turn the situation around. Sometimes that involved running, but it was always running with a purpose: whether to draw her into a trap or just to maneuver her into a more advantageous location before they fought, they only succeeded when they ran strategically.

But the other Voices were the planners. Hunted relied on his instincts, and running was all they said to do. Instinct did not give him ideas for how to fight the beast, or how to lure it into a trap. Whenever the creature came close enough to hear, all his senses said to do was *run*. But he had to find a way to turn this chase around, or the only way it would end was with him getting caught. And he had no desire to ever let this predator find its prey.

He could hear the creature coming now. It must have finally crossed the gully and found his trail, quicker than ever. Each of these little moments of safety had only gotten shorter and shorter, giving him less and less time to recover. It seemed like soon he would not catch a break at all, and the chase would not stop until he was finally caught.

But he was not done running yet.

He could hardly bear to stand again, to pull himself out of his crouch and continue his run, but he had no choice. He stifled a groan as his aching muscles stretched and pulled, and he took another deep breath in one last attempt to fully catch it. He was on the run once again.

His feet pounded on the ground, perhaps whisper-quiet to another, but as loud as hammers in his ears. Or perhaps that noise was his heart, beating furiously in a desperate attempt to keep him moving just a few steps farther. Yet Hunted could still hear the sounds of the beast crashing through the forest far behind him.

Perhaps he was lucky it was so loud, that he knew its location without having to see it, but the noise ensured he could never truly relax, knowing just how close the monster was.

Suddenly, the world opened up before him and he skidded to a stop, his feet sliding briefly in the soft earth. A clearing stretched out in front of him, a small break in the trees. He gaped in silent wonder as he saw the night sky for the first time since the chase began, the stars twinkling like smiling eyes.

A loud growl of frustration from behind shook him from his stupor. He could not risk being seen by the beast in such an open space; he only had an advantage because he was nimbler than it and could weave between the trees with relative ease. Hunted was sure that in this open field he would be caught, or at least lose enough of an advantage that it would lead to his downfall. He sprinted the remaining distance to the other side of the clearing and practically leapt back into the forest, resuming his run.

But there, in the woods, Hunted had an idea.

It grew from his fear. He felt the sudden need to cover the tracks he'd left in the clearing, to conceal the exact path he'd taken through the field. He began to curse the soft soil for providing such an easy clue to his direction when he realized that within the danger of the field also lay an opportunity: if he could leave false trails, the beast might lose track of him entirely.

It was exactly the kind of chance he had been hoping for. It would be risky, of course; his instincts were furious he was even considering giving up ground and returning to the clearing, but at the rate things were going he'd collapse from exhaustion before ever escaping the beast. This was the only chance he had to leave it behind, once and for all.

He didn't have much time. The creature was slow, but his sharp ears could still hear it getting nearer by the moment.

Decision made, Hunted doubled back through the woods, taking a wide path that would bring him back to the clearing as fast as possible without retracing his steps. Then, he crisscrossed the field again and again, leaving so many false trails and overlapping footprints that it would be impossible to find the real one among all the false leads.

Confident in his deceptions, Hunted prepared to leave and continue his run when a new idea struck him.

Once again, Hunted's instincts objected to the risky plan, and once again he chose to ignore them. Running could wait; he needed to know what was chasing him in case it found his real trail. If he stayed far enough away from the clearing, he should be able to watch the beast while maintaining enough room to slip away when the moment came. It was the only chance he'd ever have to get more than a brief glimpse of the creature, and any knowledge of its behavior could prove invaluable if the chase began again.

He doubled back one last time and hid in the foliage, near enough to see the clearing but far enough away that he would have a head start should anything get too close. There, Hunted waited, trying to silence his breathing and still his heartbeat as he heard the creature approach.

It pulled itself through the narrow gap in the forest along Hunted's path, though it hung back near the trees. It was a shapeless mass wrapped in shadows and made of too many arms and legs and heads and torsos, looking like a dozen people stuck together as a single thing. It was truly monstrous.

Hunted was right to have run from it, and he could hardly believe he was not *still* running. Doubt about his plan crept in, but it was too late to change his mind. If he fled in a panic now, it would surely notice him, and this whole exercise would have been for naught. Any exit he made would have to be slow and controlled; he had to be patient. He stifled his instincts that screamed at him to flee and forced himself to stay still and keep watching.

“Fuck this shit,” one of the heads said, its voice a whine of annoyance and simmering with rage. The mass writhed and shifted as another of the bodies seemed to move to the front from within it.

“I’m sure we can find the real trail soon enough. Just be patient,” the moving head said, its tone much calmer and more reasonable than the first. The speaker’s shadow seemed to warp and split itself from the rest of the dark mass as Hunted watched.

Following in the first’s footsteps, other forms began to split apart and step into the clearing properly, and Hunted finally realized the beast’s true nature: it was not a single creature, but instead nearly a dozen individuals packed so close together that they seemed like one. The darkness of their forms and the shadows of the trees had concealed their distinct forms until one stepped far enough into the weak starlight for Hunted to see it properly.

“‘Be patient’ he says. Like we haven’t been chasing this one for hours already. How much longer until we just give up and leave him here?” the whiny one asked.

“You know that’s not an option,” a new speaker said, its voice tired yet carrying a kind of nobility hidden beneath the weariness.

“The longer we argue, the further away he gets. We’ll never catch him at this rate,” said yet another figure, its tone full of sorrow and despair.

“He’s right, we don’t have time to waste. Everyone, start looking for paths in the tree line. He left too many false leads to follow anything inside the clearing, but he must’ve left a mark from where he entered the woods again,” the calm speaker said.

The “monster” broke apart completely now, and Hunted could finally see his pursuers properly. There were ten people, all almost identical, but he could still make out slight differences in their appearances in the darkness: slightly different postures or mannerisms made it clear that each figure was unique.

“I don’t like this. We’re too exposed. It feels like something is watching us,” whispered one of the figures standing closest to Hunted, its voice frightened and shaky.

Another of the shadows came over to the scared one, and though its head was sweeping across the forest seemingly at random, he could swear its piercing gaze locked on him for a moment. It nodded as though satisfied and turned to the frightened one.

“I don’t see anything,” it said in a dull tone. That seemed to settle the other’s nerves somewhat, and the two went back to searching, though the fearful one was still jumpy.

There was a moment of quiet as these strange beings explored the clearing. Occasionally one would pass terrifyingly close to Hunted's hiding spot, and he would freeze completely and hold his breath in case the slightest movement or sound gave away his location, but they never seemed to spot him.

They were strange creatures. It was too dark to make out many features besides their silhouettes, but they were oddly indistinct, like he was watching them through a pool of water that softened their edges. Hunted had never seen anything quite like them; even the Princess had never seemed so hazy, even in her more grotesque forms.

The worst part was how achingly *familiar* their voices were, like they belonged to an old friend since forgotten, the well-known having become strange with the passage of time. Hunted suddenly felt an odd pang of longing, as though some part of him was being drawn towards the figures, though that false familiarity and traitorous feeling only made Hunted more suspicious. He glared at the monstrous figures from within the forest whenever they passed him by.

The tense silence was broken by one of the shadowy figures. It was currently sitting in the middle of the clearing, watching the night sky, and had so far been doing just about anything other than searching for Hunted.

"I've got an idea!" the unhelpful one crowed proudly. The others groaned, but the speaker did not seem to notice or care.

"What if we all started running *away* from him? Wouldn't that bait him into chasing *us*? Then we could just lead him to the cabin!"

The figures seemed to ponder this for a moment.

"It could work..." the noble one said hesitantly.

"I doubt it," said another, its voice gruff and heavy. "He's not the kind to push an advantage, if he even noticed something changed. He'd run to the end of the earth before turning to confront us. That's just not who he is."

"Why *is* he running, anyway?" asked a sly figure, its voice slick and scheming. "Even the skittish guy wasn't terrified of us."

Hunted's ears perked up slightly. They had to be talking about him. Maybe if he knew why they were chasing him in the first place, he could use that knowledge to escape more easily.

"It's because of who he is," the reasonable one explained. "He sees himself as prey. When we all gathered together and started searching for him, he believed us to be a predator. It doesn't help that this world seems to change itself to fit how we see it; since he sees us as some sort of monsters, it probably makes us all look monstrous."

Hunted's every sense suddenly started *screaming* at him to run, telling him that these creatures had clearly noticed him somehow and were just keeping him distracted while others circled around to trap him. Why else would they talk like this, make themselves seem

reasonable, unless they knew he was listening? His eyes darted to every edge of the clearing, terrified that one of them had disappeared and was creeping up behind him. Luckily, all ten were still safely distracted trying to follow his many false trails, and none seemed to so much as look in his direction.

Regardless, the topic of conversation had made one thing quite clear: it was time for Hunted to leave. They either knew he was there, or their words were simply unhelpful, but either way he was not going to learn anything useful here.

He slowly, aching slowly, crawled backwards, away from the clearing, but then stopped completely before he could get too far.

Something about this scenario still felt indescribably *wrong*. He'd always been the Voice most in-tune with his instincts, yet each one felt like it was pulling him in a different direction. The figures felt like predators, yet they behaved more like prey. They wandered the clearing aimlessly, like they had no clue how to track him, and they lacked the *hunger*—literal or not—necessary to be a hunter. They seemed despondent, and if anything, worried—nothing like a predator should be. They talked of searching for him, yet they claimed it was he who made them into hunters. What could that mean?

And still, some part of him felt drawn to them, felt like it needed to see them properly, without the shadows that concealed them now.

None of it made any sense.

Pulled in too many directions at once, Hunted resolved to stay and watch just a little longer. Perhaps something would finally break the balance and tell him what to do.

Just then, the noble figure spoke up again. While Hunted had been distracted by his thoughts, the noble one had walked to the edge of the forest near to where he hid. The sudden volume of the figure's shout made Hunted jump in surprise and fear, then freeze in terror, hoping none of the figures had spotted his panicked movement. Once he realized he was safe, he finally registered the figure's words.

"Come on guys, we can't give up yet! He's close now, I can feel it. Once we find him, we can finally get out of these woods and head back to the cabin," the noble figure called. Then he continued, whispering so quietly that Hunted was likely the only one who could hear.

"Maybe then we'll finally feel whole."

At those words, some thread deep within Hunted's core snapped, and the stalemate between his instincts was broken.

*Incomplete*. That was the feeling Hunted had been suppressing ever since he laid eyes on the figures, the sense of longing that tried to pull him forward. Something was missing, and this other figure felt it too.

The thoughtful figure's words from earlier, something about perspectives warping reality, echoed in Hunted's mind. Could his instincts have betrayed him, created fear to feed their

own existence? Was that the cause of his disharmony?

Fear drove Hunted forward once again, as backwards as it felt. He had to know if he could trust his instincts, the one thing he'd always thought he could rely on. To do that, he would have to satisfy his longing to see these figures properly. It was not enough to simply stare at them through deep and dark shadows.

Hunted crawled back towards the clearing as quickly as he dared, hoping his target did not move before he reached it. He moved slowly, perhaps more so than necessary. He did not truly know what he was looking for, or if he really wanted to find it. But despite his hesitation, Hunted eventually reached the tree line, the noble figure practically at the tip of his beak. This close, he could just make out the scales that coated the figure's legs, the short claws that tipped its feet, and the dark feathers that concealed the rest of his form.

Hunted did not want to believe it. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, some part of him still feared that these creatures were hunters, and that he was their prey.

But then the wind shifted, and in a single moment brought to Hunted's nose the most damning evidence of all: his own scent.

His scent. His scales. His feathers, his claws, his shape, and that achingly familiar sound: his own voice. These creatures were no predators.

They were him.

They were his brethren, his fellows, his family, his blood.

It was like a light appeared and dispelled the shadows to reveal the truth. Hunted could see it clearly now, could see their true nature written just in front of him. The figures he'd been running from for so long were nothing more than his fellow Voices.

He hesitated. A piece of him still told him to run, said that it was somehow a trick, that he needed to trust his gut and not his eyes, his nose, his mind. He clenched his eyes shut, tears welling at the corners as he could not *bear* to fight his own nature, but neither could he keep running from the truth.

It felt like a piece of him was trying to rip itself free from his body, to continue its run through the forest until the whole world fell apart; some deep-set fear would rather let him die alone and afraid than dare risk being wrong.

He stifled a sob as that piece began to win, began to pull him further from the ones he loved most in the entire world, began to pull him deeper into the dark woods that would be his grave. For if his fear made monsters of his kin, then surely it had the power to run him to death. He *knew* that fear was wrong, but he had always listened to his heart; now that heart began to lie, and Hunted could do nothing to stop it. He began to crawl with aching slowness back, back away from the clearing, and away from the Voices, away from his only chance at life.

But Hunted was, above all else, a creature of survival. He could not let his own instincts, the senses he trusted to keep him alive, spell his doom. With the last ounce of strength he could muster after his hours of running, he reached a single arm forward, stretched it outwards as far as he could manage, and *pushed*.

And the barest tip of the claw on his longest finger brushed against the back of Hero's leg.

The other Voice practically jumped in surprise at the sudden contact and whirled around to see what had touched him. He stared out into the forest, and for a moment Hunted feared that Hero would not see him, would not notice his dark and quiet form tucked under the foliage. But he feared for naught, because in an instant the other Voice spotted him, lying on the soft earth with tears in his eyes, and with a speed that even Hunted could not react to, crossed the distance between them and scooped him into a tight embrace.

"We're so glad you're safe," Hero said quietly.

"I'm so sorry I ran. I didn't know it was you," Hunted replied.

"It's okay. It's over now."

The other Voices, noticing the disturbance, joined the pair at the edge of the woods. After a moment, Hero finally released Hunted, though he still kept his arm around the skittish Voice as if scared he would run off yet again. Hunted shared the other Voice's worry and was thankful for the contact.

"I'm sorry," Hunted said again, this time to the whole group.

"Well, all's well that ends well, I suppose! All is forgiven," Opportunist declared as he moseyed up to the pair.

"Now how are we supposed to get back to the cabin? It took hours of running to get here, and assuming we aren't completely lost, it'll take forever to get back!" Cheated whined.

"It shouldn't be too far. I have a good sense of direction, and I think it's just over that hill," Skeptic said, pointing to a small crest that barely came over the tree line not too far away.

"How did that happen? We've been running away from it for hours," Hero wondered.

Skeptic only shrugged.

"This forest is strange and nonsensical. A straight line isn't really straight, and paths can turn towards each other yet never cross."

Skeptic let that sink in for a moment before continuing.

"In this case though, I know the cabin is there because I, and now the rest of you, think it is. Sometimes, the world changing to fit what we believe makes things a lot easier," he said proudly.

“Then let us be off, my brethren!” Smitten cried. “The cabin awaits us, and with it, our journey’s end!”

The Voices set out, glad to be finally in each other’s full company. There was a feeling of general merriment around them: despite their many differences, they had all missed each other, though many would be unwilling to say that aloud.

Hunted paused for a moment, listening. He thought he had heard something deep in the woods behind them crackling and groaning, but the air was still and silent now. After a moment, he hurried to catch up to the other Voices, not wanting to offer the woods another chance to work its illusory powers on him.

Finally, the clearing sat still and empty once again.

## Chapter End Notes

Fun fact! I had the original idea for Hunted's chapter second (after Skeptics), and I wrote an early version of it third (after Hero's and Skeptic's chapters), making this sort-of one of the oldest sections of the fic! Though I did write it from complete scratch just now, so not *\*really\** the oldest.

We're about 2/3 of the way done now! The entire rest of the fic is almost entirely finished (other than a few rough patches here and there; I'd say every chapter is at least 90-95% complete), so hopefully things go a bit quicker now.

Ha! As if. I'm probably going to completely rewrite at least a few of the upcoming chapters, just to keep things fresh.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Once the Voices found and crested the hill, they spotted the roof of the cabin peeking through the trees in the distance, as promised. It did not take much longer for them to find the familiar path in the woods, and soon they stood at the edge of the tree line. They paused for a moment there, taking a well-deserved rest before climbing the final hill to the cabin door.

“Not that I didn’t believe you, but I’m surprised it was really that easy,” Opportunist remarked.

“Me too, to be honest,” sighed Skeptic. “Considering how difficult just finding each other was, I almost thought we’d have some kind of final trial before the end.”

There was a pause as the Voices considered his words.

“I don’t trust it,” muttered Paranoid, eying the cabin warily. Hunted and Cheated nodded their agreement.

“You, my friend, need to lighten up. Relax! It’ll be fine,” Contrarian replied, bumping lightly into Paranoid’s side as the other Voice grumbled.

“No, he’s right,” murmured Hero, who stared at the cabin with a mix of confusion and concern. “The cabin looks different from when I left. It seems...fuzzy, somehow.”

Most of the Voices either groaned or sighed at this, but none of them seemed surprised. Somehow, they knew their journey would not be over quite yet.

“We should just get up there and get whatever it is over with,” growled Stubborn. Hero nodded, and the group reluctantly trudged up the hill to the cabin, each hoping it would be the last time they had to make the journey.

“Should we at least try to make a plan before we go in?” Skeptic asked once they reached the porch of the cabin, his voice tinged with a hope that he knew would be ignored. When most of the Voices shook their heads, he just sighed and gestured for them to get moving.

Stubborn was the first one through, bursting through the door as though trying to break it off its hinges. But to the surprise of each of the Voices, he froze stock-still before making it past the doorway, his face a picture of shock, confusion, and perhaps a hint of fear. Seeing the most brazen of the Voices seemingly too terrified to move was too much for Hunted and Paranoid, who each turned and prepared to sprint back to the woods. Hero moved to try and catch them before they could flee too far when a sudden voice caught them all off guard.

“You do not need to be afraid of me. You are safe here,” the voice said, simultaneously familiar and yet strange, a multitude of indistinct tones layered over each other to make a

sound they all knew far too well: the Princess.

Of course, her saying those words only made most of the Voices even more wary, but Hero spoke up before anyone could start running.

“It’s okay. I think we should trust her. I heard something earlier—I was going to tell you when we got back to the cabin, but...” he trailed off.

Stubborn shook himself out of his stupor and pressed forward into the cabin, followed closely by a curious Skeptic. Contrarian practically bounded inside, Cold shadowed him lazily, and Opportunist—not wanting to be left behind—slunk in soon after, followed eventually by Broken. Cheated scoffed and stormed in, muttering to himself about how unfair it all was. Hunted and Paranoid still looked like they were about to bolt, but they both quickly decided they would rather risk whatever was inside the cabin than solitude. Surprisingly, Smitten seemed the most conflicted, but he eventually took a deep breath and walked in with his head held high, his bravado nothing more than a thin charade. Hero joined them all last, leaving the door open behind him, just in case.

The inside of the cabin was much the same as it had always been, but Hunted noted that the walls and ceiling seemed strangely far away. Upon closer inspection, however, he could not see anything obviously different from its usual appearance, so he turned his focus to the more immediate—and undeniably larger—concern standing in the middle of the room.

The center of the cabin was filled by a bizarre figure, shaped vaguely like a person but seemingly made from a dozen or more bodies. It was an abomination of flesh and should have appeared grotesque, yet somehow it did not. Even the most bitter of the Voices was forced to admit that it looked simply *correct* in a way that could not be put into words. None of them could imagine the figure before them appearing any differently than it did; there was simply no other way it should have been.

Hero broke the silence first.

“You’re the Shifting Mound, aren’t you? I heard you and him talking earlier.”

The figure’s many faces—at least, the ones the Voices could see—smiled at Hero. Some wore a gentle beam, others an amused grin, and yet others a joyous silent laugh.

“That is what I am called by those who seek to name me. I am change, and freedom, and time, and so many other things. I suppose you would call me a god,” the Shifting Mound replied.

It was hard to make sense of her, though Skeptic was trying his best. Somehow, the Shifting Mound simultaneously towered over them yet did not reach the ceiling; she was made of dozens of bodies each as large as one of the Voices yet in total seemed no taller than any of them. It did not help that each body that made her form kept moving and twisting; some rose to the surface while others were buried beneath. It was as if she actively resisted observation and rejected understanding, but Skeptic strained for as long as he could. He was eventually forced to abandon his attempts when he faced the onset of a dizzying migraine.

“Are you the Princess?” Smitten asked, still oddly hesitant. He had not forgotten the fear and anxiety he had felt back in the woods, and he was still worried about the true nature of the Princess’s feelings towards him and the other Voices.

“Each Princess you saw is a piece of me. She was caged, small, and incomplete. But she became what the Long Quiet—my shadow, my reflection, my everlasting companion—perceived her to be, and so the vessels of the Princesses you met became full of his thoughts and memories. I used those to build my infinities until I was whole, until I became everything I was supposed to be. In a way, I *am* the Princess: I am everything she ever was, and everything she ever could have been.”

“Then what are we?” asked the Skeptic. He was almost frantically thinking of questions to ask now that he had finally met someone who might be able to answer them.

“You are fragments of the Long Quiet, pieces of my potential contained within his otherwise static form. When he looked inside himself, he shaped you with his perceptions of his own identity and made you into reflections of his thoughts and feelings.”

“So, if we’re pieces of him, then why are we here and not wherever he is?” interjected Cheated.

“Because I could not bear to lose you,” she said simply.

“What?” asked Paranoid, almost rudely. Something about her phrasing made him feel threatened, and he was already on edge as it was.

Skeptic cleared his throat.

“What do you mean, ‘lose us’?” he clarified, a little more politely. While she had not made any moves towards violence yet, the Voices all knew that she was at least as dangerous as the Princess and had no desire to attract her ire.

“For the Long Quiet to retrieve all of my vessels, he needed to forget the paths that came before. I knew I could wipe away the edges of his memories and remained confident they would return each time that he found his way back to me.

“But you are unique individuals. You had pulled away from the rest of him and were nothing but small and delicate fragments clinging to the edges of his soul. If I wiped away his memories while you remained, your unique identities would have been swept away and lost forever, returned to the depths of his being, never to resurface.”

Hero was suddenly reminded of the comment made by one of the Princesses comparing him to a ‘piece of shattered glass’. He was not fond of the idea that he was only a piece of a larger whole, broken and incomplete, but he had to admit that her words made sense.

The Shifting Mound continued.

“I had no desire to destroy any part of the one I love, nor do I have any right to.”

There was a moment of silence as the Voices considered her words before Hero spoke quietly.

“You-you love him?” he asked, his voice soft and hesitant, like he thought he had misheard or was afraid of asking out of turn. He had always felt something towards the Princess, at least until she turned into a monster in her different incarnations, but he was surprised to learn that a goddess made from those Princesses might mirror those feelings.

“Does that mean...” Smitten trailed off, his usual confidence still too shaken to force the words from his throat, to voice the question on all of the Voices’ minds.

*Does that mean the Princess loved us too?*

The Shifting Mound only smiled again as she gazed at Smitten warmly. For the first time, she moved from her place in the center of the room, the floor of the cabin warping and twisting itself around where her multitude of bodies met the ground as she slowly flowed towards Smitten. He stayed frozen in place as she gently reached one of her many hands out and cradled his face. Some of the Voices gazed on in jealousy, others in fear, but Smitten only stared into her eyes, unable to look away, his expression a mixture of hope and dread at whatever words she might say next.

“I heard your fears in the forest. You were right to question your feelings; no two of my vessels have seen you the same way. Some have hated you; others saw you only as a means to an end,” she paused, and Smitten’s eyes were downcast as his every fear from back in the forest was affirmed. The Shifting Mound’s hand fell down his cheek and under his chin, lifting it back up until his eyes met hers, and she continued.

“But others did truly love you, in their own ways. You do not have to be afraid. Your bond was not as false as you feared.”

Tears streamed down Smitten’s face as he took and released a deep breath. As the Shifting Mound flowed back to her original space in the center of the cabin, he wiped away the tears and stood taller and more confidently than he had since he had left the forest.

However, some of the other Voices had caught something the Shifting Mound had said. Skeptic’s face twisted quizzically as he pondered the implications of her words, while Paranoid’s eyes widened in fearful realization. However, it was Cheated who spoke first, mixed anger and betrayal threaded through his voice.

“What do you mean, you ‘heard his fears’? Were you spying on us?” he demanded.

The Shifting Mound’s various smiles never left her face as she turned her gaze on Cheated and his fury and spoke.

“Each time the Long Quiet returned to me, I plucked you from the edges of his soul to rescue you from oblivion. However, you were not enough of anything to exist on your own, so I brought your fragments within myself to hold until you were. As the Long Quiet brought me more of my infinite vessels, so too did he bring me more pieces of you, and I combined those

parts to make you solid. You still exist within me now; this space is a part of me, as is the world outside.”

“Is that why we have so many memories of different paths? Because we’re made of every version of us combined?” Skeptic asked.

“The Long Quiet took every possible version of the infinite paths needed to complete me, and you are formed from the infinite possible versions of yourselves that he found along those paths.”

As the Voices pondered her words, the Shifting Mound’s eyes unfocused. It was as if she were gazing at something none of the Voices could see or deeply considering a sudden thought. After a moment, she sighed quietly in disappointment.

“Our time draws short. I would prefer you be free to roam the forest outside or stay here as you please, but unfortunately your well-deserved rest must be delayed for a short time longer.”

Fear and concern washed across the Voices’ faces at her words. Paranoid looked around frantically, Hunted prepared to run, Stubborn looked like he was about to fight something, and Skeptic and Cheated both opened their mouths to ask or demand answers.

Before any of them could act, however, they all heard an indescribable noise from outside the cabin, somewhere between the shattering of solid rock and the crashing of a wave. The Voices were stunned into silence, and the Shifting Mound continued with hardly a pause.

“It is in my nature to change, and the world outside is a part of my infinities. Before, your perceptions helped shape that piece of me and force it to maintain the form you expected, but as you began to recognize its true nature, that false solidity crumbled. Now it has begun to collapse completely. If you remain here too much longer, you will be swept up by the unending change and be scattered within my infinities once more.”

She said the words with such a calm tone that it took Hero a moment to process how terrifying they really were. It had taken ages for the Voices to find each other, and that was with a somewhat solid reality beneath them. If they were swept away by a tidal wave of chaos, they might never find each other again.

“What do we do?” Hero asked, trying—and failing—to keep the panic from his voice.

“Much like how you are formed from the more malleable parts of the Long Quiet, I have regions of relative stability. One of them is nearby; you will find safety there.”

The Shifting Mound looked pained for a moment, as if she were struggling to hold back a great weight, then the first hint of worry twinged within her voice as she spoke again.

“I will resist my nature for as long as possible. Hurry.”

Before the Voices could respond, the floorboards of the cabin warped as arms reached up from the ground, each one grabbing hold of one of the Shifting Mound’s multitude of bodies

and pulling them down into the ground. In mere moments, the floor smoothed over and she was gone, as if she never existed at all.

“But where do we go?” called Cheated, yet no response came.

Paranoid quickly glanced out of the cabin window and watched as the entire forest *heaved*, as if the entire world existed on the surface of a vast ocean in the middle of a storm. His face went pale with fear when, as far as the eye could see, massive trees crumbled into dust, twisted into indescribable sculptures, burst into blooming flame, and shifted in innumerable other ways. Whole sections of earth seemed to invert, great chasms forming as islands of solid rock floated into the sky before popping like bubbles.

As Hero turned back to the others from where he, too, watched the world go mad, something in the cabin caught his eye. He looked puzzled for a moment before his eyes widened in realization.

“The basement! The door wasn’t here before—that must be the safe place!” he cried.

The Voices were moving in the blink of an eye, with no time to consider or doubt Hero’s words. Opportunist was the fastest, with Paranoid and Hunted following closely behind. Somehow, the doorway downstairs let them all pass at once, although it was not visibly wider than usual, but none of the Voices noticed the discrepancy as they fled down the stairs.

They all moved as fast as possible as at first the ceiling, then the walls, then the floor of the cabin began to warp and twist. Hero was last, pushing all of the others in front of him, and he could feel as every step on the staircase behind him twisted, warped, and shattered as soon as his foot left its surface.

Finally, after the longest few seconds of their lives, the Voices arrived safely on the cobblestoned floor of the basement, panting heavily, but uninjured. They turned quickly and watched as the stairwell continued to warp and twist for a moment before disappearing completely, leaving nothing in its place but smooth wall. They all stared at the blank space for a moment before Cheated spoke.

“Well, isn’t that just great. We’re trapped in the basement again with no way out, and the entire world outside just went to shit. How wonderful,” he spat.

Hero sighed, the sound a physical manifestation of his utter exhaustion.

“Well, we’re all safe, at least for the moment. We might as well settle in and wait for something to happen,” Hero said, trying to remain optimistic. The Voices all turned from the wall where the rest of the world used to be, then froze as they locked eyes with the nearly a half-dozen Princesses looking back at them.

There was a moment of silence as the two groups stared at each other, broken eventually by Cheated’s tired sigh.

And many questions are finally answered! Well, I suppose there was only ever variations of one question: "What the fuck is going on?". But now that's been answered! Now you get to ask many new questions, such as "What the FUCK is going on?"

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Before anyone else could say or do anything, Stubborn roared a gleeful “Yes!” and charged forward. His fist rocketed into the face of one of the Princesses, who stumbled back in shock. All the Voices except for Hero—who merely sighed—stepped back in surprise, pushing the entire group into one corner of the basement.

When the towering horned woman straightened up with a grin and wiped the blood from her dripping nose, her smile equaled Stubborn’s own as she balled her fists and prepared to swing, and her booming voice matched the brawny Voice’s joyous energy as she practically shouted her reply.

“FINALLY! I’VE BEEN WAITING FOREVER FOR—”

“Could you two please just wait a moment?” Hero interrupted before they could continue. “I’m sure the rest of us have several questions, and I see this meeting going much more smoothly without you two killing each other.”

Stubborn and Adversary both glanced at Hero, then back to one another. They both nodded respectfully, their eyes making a quiet promise to continue the fight later, and Stubborn returned to the rest of the Voices.

“Thank you,” Hero said, his voice tinged with gratitude and genuine surprise that the pair had listened. He pushed himself to the front of the crowd of Voices and finally got a good look at the small group of Princesses.

The Adversary had already made herself known and was the closest to the Voices, standing tall and proud in the center of the room. The blood that still ran down her face and stained her grinning teeth red made her already vicious appearance even more frightful, and while she seemed to be waiting patiently for her long-awaited fight with Stubborn, Hero did not trust that patience to last long.

Another Princess sat still and straight-backed against the far wall and stared down the Voices with utter dispassion, the very picture of stiff-lipped royalty. It was impossible to tell if she saw them as people at all, or merely potential resources and threats to be exploited and neutralized. While she lacked the chains that once confined her, the Prisoner was still clearly recognizable.

The third and final Princess crouched in the furthest corner, her back pressed into the wall as she glared at both the Voices and the other Princesses in equal measure. Her eyes darted suspiciously between both groups as her legs flexed beneath her—whether to flee or to pounce, Hero did not know. Her tail lashed against the floor, betraying the Witch’s nerves.



Hero paused for a moment before speaking, considering his options. He was not quite as clever as Skeptic or as cunning as Opportunist, but by stepping forward first he had inadvertently elected himself as a representative of the Voices, and he knew he would have to be careful. Adversary was always looking for a fight, Prisoner was stonily silent at best and borderline hostile at worst, and Witch would interpret the slightest misstep as evidence for a grand plot against her.

In other words, Hero and the other Voices were walking a tightrope, and one false step could turn the basement into a bloodbath. None of them knew for certain if they could die in this new place, and Hero did not want to find out.

He decided that honesty would be the best route forward, so he chose his words carefully and spoke.

“I’m sorry about that. He’s really excited to catch up with her,” Hero apologized, his tone chagrined and somewhat embarrassed. Stubborn just kept grinning at Adversary, practically nodding and seemingly unaware of the tense atmosphere of the basement.

“It’s good to properly meet you, Princesses. We’re, err...” Hero continued before pausing, confused. He was trying to find a way to explain just what the Voices were when Prisoner interjected.

“We know what you are,” she said curtly. “Every time he trailed off and went silent, he was talking to you, wasn’t he?”

“I could see you plotting behind his eyes, scheming with him to kill me,” Witch spat.

“You were the one who understood me,” Adversary said, looking at Stubborn and matching his grin.

“Well, it’s great to see that we all know each other, it was lovely catching up with you, now how do we leave?” Cheated snapped, and Hero had to bite back a groan at his rudeness. Luckily, the Princesses did not seem to mind. To answer the Voice’s question, Prisoner and Adversary merely shrugged, while the Witch grinned mockingly.

“You can’t. We’ve been here from the beginning, and there’s no way out for any of us. It looks like we’re all trapped here—forever,” she sneered.

Some of the Voices bristled at this, and Hero desperately tried to regain control of the situation and maintain some kind of peace.

“Well then,” he replied, speaking more towards his fellow Voices than to the Princesses. “If we’re going to be here *forever*, then we should try to be *good roommates*.” He tried as hard as possible to convey his real meaning, that they needed to be calm and not start any fights. Forever was a long time, and a poor first meeting could make the rest of their existences miserable.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about *me*,” Cheated replied. Hero breathed a sigh of relief that was, unfortunately, premature.

“It’s *her* you can’t trust!” he continued. “Or am I the only one who remembers what she did to us?”

For a moment, the world seemed to stand still. It was almost like watching a great stone perched on the edge of a cliff, seeming to float just before it fell and destroyed everything in its path.

Paranoid was still trying to recover from the surprise and fear that washed over him when he first saw the Princesses, while nearby, Cold watched the proceedings with his usual dispassionate curiosity. Hunted crouched like a cornered animal, alternating between searching for escape and threatening violence at every moment. Cheated and Stubborn both prepared for a fight to break out, one fearing the inevitable breakdown of conversation and the other desperately hoping for it. Smitten and Contrarian were both torn between their warring natures; Smitten’s desire to protect his brothers and the Princesses both, and Contrarian’s need to break the tension and the knowledge that doing so could be fatal, paralyzed the pair. Skeptic, Opportunist, and Hero were each desperately thinking of anything that could stave off violence and perhaps bring the conversation to more stable ground, while Broken had given up entirely and patiently waited for his death.

Unfortunately, time could not stand still forever, and the boulder began its fall.

“*Me? I* can’t be trusted? Who plotted to betray me every time we reached the stairs? Who stabbed me in the back and made me into this wretched thing in the first place? Everything I ever did to you was only because of everything *you* did to *me*! It’s all your fault!” Witch snapped back.

Several Voices opened their mouths to reply, and it seemed this conversation would continue to spiral beyond anyone’s control. But just before any more hateful words could be spat, before all hell could break loose and doom them all to living what remained of their lives in misery, something changed. A spot on one of the walls, roughly halfway between the Voices and Princesses, suddenly buckled and bulged inwards, as if the solid stone wall was made of soft leather or cloth and some writhing thing was trying to force its way inside.

The Voices, still cramped together from earlier, tried and failed to press themselves further back and away from the strange lump. The space was simply too tight for them to maneuver away from the thing, so they were forced to stand their ground.

Skeptic looked to the Princesses to see if they knew what was going on, but their reaction was far too mixed to parse completely. Witch backed herself into the corner from where she had stalked out and eyed the lump with suspicion, as if whatever was pressing itself through the wall would be a threat. However, Prisoner merely sighed quietly and nonchalantly shifted further from the lump as though she could not care less about it. Adversary’s reaction was the strangest: she strolled over to the mass with barely a moment’s hesitation and placed her claws at the gap between two bricks. Skeptic understood a moment later when she suddenly heaved with all her might and forced a crack in the wall which, despite the strange lump, still appeared to be solid stone.

Whatever or whoever was inside the bulge collapsed forward and into Adversary’s waiting arms as the wall reformed itself behind it. The Voices could only see the figure’s arms

hanging limply from where Adversary held them, but it was clear that whatever had been inside the lump was yet another Princess.

The Voices waited with bated breath for something to happen. Hero was nervous about what this new Princess would do; the situation was delicate, and most Princesses would only escalate the tension in the basement and spiral it even further out of control.

The apparently unconscious Princess's arms twitched for a moment before gently pushing off from Adversary as the figure got to her feet. Less than a minute after the lump first appeared in the wall, a new Princess stood in the basement, slowly blinking at each of the Voices and Princesses as if she had just awoken from a deep sleep.

Hero's breath caught as he finally got a good look at and recognized the new Princess. He'd had his hopes when he saw her arms, saw the bloody wounds tracing a dozen paths along her pale skin, but he could not help but let loose a sigh of relief when he saw the twisted vines winding through her hair. If any Princess could provide stability and common ground between the two groups, it would be Thorn.

From the way Smitten stopped breathing entirely, it seemed that Hero was not the only one to recognize the new arrival. The lovestruck Voice stared at her with wide eyes filled with a thousand unspoken hopes, and once she blinked the last of the cloudiness from her eyes, she shyly met and held his gaze.

There was a quiet moment as the world seemed to stop, Voice and Princess staring at each other with eyes full of words too important to ever be said. Not breaking his gaze, Smitten slowly, hesitantly, stretched his leg forward to take the first step towards the woman he loved.

"Who are you? What was that?" Paranoid asked suddenly. The silence broken and moment lost, Thorn seemed to come to her senses and looked away from Smitten for the first time, glancing at the other Voices in turn. Smitten let loose his still-held breath and let his leg fall back to the ground in silent disappointment.

"I'm sorry for the interruption. I came in hopes that I could help settle things down," Thorn explained finally, before tilting her head in puzzlement. "Or did she send me? It's hard to separate our thoughts, even now."

"She? You mean the Shifting Mound?" Skeptic asked. "If she wanted to 'settle things down,' why didn't she come here herself?"

"Because my—because *her* presence unnerves the other vessels—" she began, before being suddenly cut off.

"Don't call me that," Witch spat. "I'm not a 'vessel.' I'm not just a piece of her to absorb whenever she wants. I'm *me*."

"Right. Of course," Thorn replied gently. Witch just scoffed.

The Voices and Princesses stood and stared awkwardly at each other, and Adversary seemed disappointed that violence between the two groups had not yet broken out. After a moment,

Skeptic cleared his throat and spoke, hoping that the momentary peace would give him the space needed to let loose the many questions trapped inside his mind.

“So, we all have a lot of different and conflicting memories of everything. As far as we can tell, we remember every version of events—every single decision we could have made, we remember making it. Is that true for you as well?” he asked. His tone was cautious, as if he believed even the slightest misstep could reignite the anger he knew was simmering just beneath the surface. As far as anyone was aware, that was precisely the case.

Prisoner and Adversary simply nodded, but Witch snarled from her corner of the basement.

“Oh yes, I remember *everything*,” she spat. “I remember you with that shiny little blade at my back, crawling up the stairs with schemes in your heart and lies on your tongue. Or coming down so sweetly unarmed, just waiting until you could get me upstairs and the blade within your reach. I *especially* remember the look in your eyes when I turned the tables and slammed the door in your face, or as you bled out at the bottom of the stairs.”

The Witch panted for a moment to catch her breath as many of the Voices stared at her in a combination of surprise and renewed fear. The Princesses seemed accustomed to her ranting, or at least unsurprised by it, though Thorn at least looked somewhat saddened by her prior incarnation’s sadistic glee.

But unlike the others, Hero’s face bore a look of confusion. Something Witch had said—or rather, *not* said—had caught his ear. When Thorn turned back from Witch and looked back to the Voices, she caught his puzzled expression and quickly realized what Hero had noticed.

“Each of us only remembers the ends of our own paths,” she explained with a gentle smile. “Despite the two of us coming from the same root, neither of us can see onto the other’s branch past the moment they diverged.”

The Voices considered her words, while Witch seemed to reject them altogether.

“So, you’re telling me that you are...me? Somehow? Who are you trying to fool with such an obvious lie? We’re nothing alike!” Witch’s tone was accusatory and sharp and was indeed nothing like Thorn’s gentle voice. Thorn’s smile faded, replaced with what appeared to be sorrow and pain.

“Just because you refuse to believe it doesn’t make it any less true. I know much of what he did to you. What he did to us both. Sometimes he just tried to make a show of coming to help us, then betrayed us at the last moment. Other times he simply left to find a weapon to slay us with, and we used our wits to lock him away instead. You must’ve endured more that I cannot see, to have your story ended so. But I am proof he can be different, that *we* can be different.”

Thorn’s words seemed to have struck a nerve with Witch, but before she could reply, another did instead.

“And let me be clear, she really didn’t *endure* any more from us than you,” Opportunist interjected. “If anything, *we* suffered for *her*! We tried so hard to set you both free, just to

have the door shut on us, or be pulled down the stairs, or be stabbed by the very blade we gave you! It's your fault we never made it out!" he cried, his accusatory finger pointing like a knife towards Witch.

"In the interest of honesty, we did stab her in the back sometimes. Which, as I recall, was *your* suggestion," replied Hero with a regretful sigh. He really had no interest in adding any more fuel to the fire of Witch's rage, but he knew even a small lie now could be devastating later, when the truth would inevitably come to light.

"She killed us half a dozen times for every single time we killed her on the stairs. All I'm saying is we would've made it out of the cabin almost every time if it weren't for her," Opportunist retorted in annoyance.

"Just shut it. You have to admit, that whole mess was at least as much your fault as hers."

The Princesses merely watched the Voices argue. Prisoner seemed to be listening intently, trying to learn as much as possible while staying unnoticed in the corner. Adversary also watched with sharp and focused eyes, though she was less interested in the words being spoken and more impatiently hopeful that a fight would break out—a fight that she would gleefully join. She had been bored of all this talking and only wanted to restart her battle with Stubborn, though she could wait for a little while longer. Witch seemed perfectly content to let the Voices tear themselves apart and watched with spiteful glee from her corner. Finally, closest to the arguing Voices, Thorn shook off the old distrust creeping in from the edges of her soul as memories of betrayals and lies both old and new tried to overpower the gentle kiss that still sat warm on her lips.

Before Adversary and Witch's hopes of violence could come to fruition, however, a sly grin crept over Opportunist's lips as he found an opportunity to shift the blame for their actions.

"Actually, it was all His fault!" the sly Voice almost purred. "The Narrator in our head! We would've made it out of there just fine the very first time if He didn't take control of us. He *forced* us to stab you! I'm sorry, Princess, truly sorry, but I didn't want to go against somebody who could just puppet us like that. Someone with that kind of power isn't someone you mess with, after all, and there was no way to kill *him*. We had no choice, really!"

Before Witch could decide to reject this information as just more lies, an unexpected Voice spoke up in Opportunist's defense.

"He's right," Broken groaned from where he sat slouched against the basement wall. The Voices all turned to him in shock as he spoke for the first time since coming back to the cabin, and the Princesses craned their necks to try and see him through the crowd of Voices.

"Of course I am!" Opportunist crowed in pride before he paused and furrowed his brow in puzzlement. "But, uh, why exactly?" he continued, confused.

"Nothing we did mattered," Broken replied. "Even when the Narrator didn't force our hand, we never really made a decision at all. We just talked—*he* decided," the tired Voice finished before slumping back into himself.

Hero's eyes widened in realization, and he nodded and wagged his finger in agreement. "That's true! We really weren't responsible for *anything* that happened to any of you. We never made any decisions at all!"

There was a moment of silence as the Princesses contemplated what the Voices had said. Hero knew if they could just convince Witch not to hate them, or at least to not try and kill them, all the Voices' problems would be solved, and they could begin finding a way out of the basement.

Unfortunately, the tense and delicate quiet was broken by none other than a Voice clearing his throat. Contrarian lay on the floor beside Broken, his head propped up by one arm and an almost smug grin curling across his face. He looked like the very picture of relaxed calm, a stark contrast to Hero's and most of the other Voices' frantic stress.

"Well," he purred, sounding far too pleased with himself for anyone else's good. "That's not *exactly* true, is it?"

Hero was not the only one of the Voices to groan his displeasure at Contrarian's interjection. It would be difficult enough to convince the Princesses to trust them—or even just leave them alone—without the other Voice's attempts to interject humor.

"What does he mean by that?" Prisoner asked suspiciously.

Hero had trouble restraining the frustrated scowl that momentarily twitched across his face. What little progress he had made was gone, and Prisoner's question seemed to indicate that the Voices had even lost ground in the battle to earn the Princess' trust. Hero turned to glare at Contrarian, who at least had the decency to look chagrined, before he turned back to the Princesses with a tired smile.

"We didn't do much, honestly," he said. "He forced us to take the blade before we met you, which seemed to have been the best course of action considering what happened," he said, gesturing to Skeptic. "And the smartass over here made us throw the blade out of the window once or twice, because he just loves stirring trouble," he continued, with Contrarian giving a small bow from his place on the floor. "I suggest you just ignore him," Hero added, and Contrarian gave a mock pout.

"Those were the only decisions that really affected any versions of you, but for full transparency, those two also betrayed and murdered us," Hero concluded, gesturing to Broken and Smitten.

He knew the words were a mistake the moment they left his throat. His annoyance at Contrarian's antics and his exhaustion from running straight from the woods into this new mess combined to make his old anger at the other Voices' betrayals bubble back to the surface. His eyes widened in shock and panic as he clamped his mouth shut in a desperate attempt to stop the sound from reaching any others' ears, but it was too late. Hero had set loose something that would not be so easily restrained.

"What?" Smitten asked far too quietly, his eyes snapping away from where he still stared dreamily at Thorn. Hero turned with a resigned expression, knowing deep in his heart that the

argument that was soon to follow would undoubtedly ruin any chances of a peaceful coexistence with the Princesses in the basement, and that it would all be his fault.

“What?” Smitten said again, as if he still could not at all understand the words Hero had spoken. “I betrayed you? How could I have?”

Hero tried desperately to interject, but Smitten continued undaunted. His face wore something that could almost be called a smile, but the fury in his eyes made clear that there was no humor in his heart.

“How could any deed of mine be called a betrayal when it so closely followed that heinous crime? He *murdered* her in cold blood, when she had done *nothing* to us but love us! He butchered the Princess, plunged the blade into her heart, and in doing so, he betrayed us all! If anything, my own deeds were a mercy, so we did not have to live in a world without her for even a moment longer!” he finished, his voice rising from almost a whisper to a raging shout that echoed for a moment against the basement walls.

“But there was something so deeply *wrong* with the whole situation—it just wasn’t right,” Hero said pleadingly in the moment of silence between Smitten’s heaving gasps. The enraged Voice took a deep, shuddering breath to calm himself before he replied.

“I know. I know now that there were some versions of her who did not love us, who were undeserving of our love,” he paused, glancing for a moment at where Broken lay in the corner before continuing “and of our faith. But she was innocent. She had committed no crime, was undeserving of our violence. Any oddities in her behavior could have been resolved without violence. But instead, he plunged our blade into her chest. Into the heart of the woman we all loved.”

An almost cruel smile twisted across Smitten’s face as his captive audience slowly came to realize just what his last words meant.

“Oh yes, you heard me correctly. I know you all loved her too—every version of her, no matter how cruel, you all felt some small *shred* of affection for her regardless. We’re all reflections of him, aren’t we? The decider. I always loved her, so it stands to reason that so did he—which means that you did too. We may each imitate different parts of his identity, but we’re all the same in the end.”

Many of the Voices—Opportunist, Paranoid, Skeptic, and more besides—tried to deny Smitten’s claims, opening their mouths to interject, to refute, or even simply to lie, to do anything but admit the truth. Smitten stared at them all in turn, daring them each to say their piece, and in the end the Voices’ mouths closed again. The Princesses watched this with wide eyes, until finally someone spoke.

“Is that true?” Thorn asked hesitantly.

“Of course,” Cold replied simply.

It took a moment for the Voices to realize just who had spoken.

“Wait, really? You too?” Skeptic asked, incredulous. “Out of all of us, you’re the one I’d least expect to feel it. What happened to telling us we needed to ignore our feelings?”

“What feelings do you think I was telling you all to ignore?” Cold asked. When none of the Voices replied, he continued. “Fear and pain were only part of it. We were still drawn to her by something. Why else would we always go to the cabin? Leaving was always an option—one that we never took. Why do you think that is?” Cold said.

“But of course,” he shrugged. “The feelings weren’t mine. They didn’t originate from my own heart, but that’s true for you all as well. We all felt mere echoes of his own emotions, because we are all reflections of him.”

The Voices and Princesses stared at each other in silence from across the basement, each considering their own thoughts and feelings. The tension from before was still present, but the fight had been drained from each of them and replaced by exhaustion. Smitten’s outburst may have revealed a secret most of them would have rather kept quiet, but it served to quell the building argument and keep the two groups from attacking each other, at least for now.

The silence was eventually broken by a quiet voice from the back wall of the basement.

“What does it matter?” Broken muttered to himself. It was clear he did not mean to be overheard, but in the cramped confines of the basement, it was also unavoidable. “Loved her, hated her, it’s all meaningless now. All the decisions have already been made. We have no purpose left.”

The dour Voice hugged his knees to his chest and appeared to make his best effort of disappearing entirely—to no avail. Many of the Voices moved as much as they could to comfort him; those closest to him patted him on the shoulders or murmured small words of peace in his ear. But in their hearts, they knew he was right: there was nothing left for them but Princesses who seemed to distrust or outright despise them and the long wait for oblivion.

“I’m sorry,” said an unexpected voice from behind the huddle of Voices. They turned and scrambled away in surprise as those who were most afraid of the Princesses suddenly found themselves face-to-dozen-faces with the Shifting Mound. She stood in a gap in the basement wall, staring at them all with sorrow-filled eyes.

“What are you doing here?” asked Paranoid and Prisoner simultaneously. The startled Voice’s tone carried its usual suspicion, but it was touched by something else, too—hope, perhaps, or just desperation. Broken’s despair had touched them all, and perhaps he thought the god of change could change their fate. On the other hand, Prisoner’s voice was far more reserved, but hidden within it was a note of something that resembled fear. Few of the basement’s occupants would recognize the emotion’s presence, buried as it was by layers of practiced calm, but it was there, nonetheless.

“I made you something. A gift. This place is far too small to contain all of you, especially if more of my vessels separate themselves to join you,” she said, glancing at Thorn before continuing. “So, I crafted another from one of the Long Quiet’s feathers. It has enough of his stability to hold itself together within my form, and he was all too happy to provide it for you all. He is, and will always be, grateful for your support and guidance during your trials



together. He would come here himself, but for all of him to exist within all of me would destroy us both.”

The Voices spilled into the new space as soon as the Shifting Mound moved out of the entrance, acting more like a crashing wave than a group of people. In the fear and surprise at seeing the Princesses, none of them had quite realized how cramped the basement was with all of them inside, but they all breathed a sigh of relief as this new space opened up before them.

It looked like a natural continuation of the basement, but far larger, with branching hallways stretching off into the distance. A sturdy table sat in the middle, with more than enough space for each of the Voices and Princesses to sit at it if they chose. But with how many of the Voices seemed to be itching to race off into the many hallways of the place, it seemed unlikely the table would see much use anytime soon.

The Princesses followed the Voices, causing them to edge yet further into the extended basement, but before anyone could get too far into the structure, the Shifting Mound spoke up again.

“I’m truly sorry that you feel purposeless. If that is the case, there is one more thing I should tell you. My vessels can always return to me when they so choose, and you have a way out as well, if you choose to take it.”

Her voice was solemn and resigned, as if this was a topic she had no desire to discuss. Sensing the grave nature of whatever words would follow, the Voices stayed quiet, despite the many questions burning in each of their minds.

Seeing that whatever was coming had no bearing on her own life, Witch sprinted deeper into the new structure and away from the Voices, while Adversary glanced meaningfully at Stubborn before leaving to find a suitable battleground. Thorn decided to stay and wait near Smitten, and Prisoner slipped unnoticed into one of the many chairs around the table.

“You are facets of my love, of my beautiful eternity, and I have no desire for you or him to ever leave my side. But if you believe that continued existence would be too much to bear, then I can end your suffering.”

The Voices responded to her words in different ways. Hunted and Paranoid seemed suspicious, as if her vague offer could be some kind of threat, while Skeptic and Hero both appeared curious at what she meant, and Broken appeared to even brighten—at least, as much as the despairing Voice could ever be considered bright. Most of the Voices, however, had far more mixed reactions, or in Cold’s case, no reaction at all.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Paranoid, cautiously.

“You are fragments of change, and therefore, fall within my domain. I could return you to your original state, from before the Long Quiet ever turned his gaze inward and saw your reflections looking back. You would cease to exist as yourselves; all of the delicate features that form you would be gone, and the Long Quiet would be as he was before you separated.”

“What’s stopping himself from just creating us once again, like he did the first time? Could we come back that way?” Skeptic asked.

“His own nature would prevent it. Before, he believed himself mortal and changeable, and his powers were restrained by that belief. Now, he has seen himself for who he truly is. Much like how this space, itself a piece of his stability, is malleable now that it is within my form, his own fragments of myself are far more static than they would be otherwise. Despite being shards of change, once you are returned to him, you will be unable to revert to what you are now.”

She paused, considering, then continued.

“Perhaps some aspect, some pale shadow of your identities, could return, given enough time. But it matters not; for you, this would be an ending. I do not say this as a threat or warning of violence, but to merely show you another door available to you. You have earned the right to decide your own ending; you deserve rest, if that is your choice.”

She waited a moment as the Voices pondered her words and let them sink in.

“I will leave you with your thoughts. Perhaps exploring this place will be helpful; I expect you will find whatever you are looking for within these walls, and more besides,” she finished, before vanishing once more into the ground.

The Voices wandered off into the new space. They would have plenty of time to consider the Shifting Mound’s words as they explored their new home.

## Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait, everyone! Who would have guessed that writing a dialogue-heavy chapter with fifteen separate characters would be a bit of a slog? Luckily, all of the remaining chapters will return to a one-on-one or small group style, so they'll be much easier. Plus all but one or two of them should be completely finished with minimal edits required, so I'm hoping they'll be quick. No promises though!

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hero watched as the other Voices wandered—or in some cases, ran—through the many doors branching off from the main hall, but he stayed behind. He figured he had an eternity before him to explore his new home, so he chose instead to sink into a nearby chair. He felt like he had been moving nonstop since the very first path in the woods, and he was grateful for the opportunity to truly rest, even if just for a moment.

It took him a second to realize that he had quite literally never sat in a chair for even an instant of his long existence, and a small chuckle rose from his belly before a quiet cough made him go pale. His face burned, an embarrassed flush washing across it as he realized that he was not alone, finally noticing a completely still and silent Princess who sat just a few chairs down.

The Prisoner looked slightly different from how he remembered her. Her old chains were gone, of course, but she also had a savage scar tracing across her throat from her prior decapitation that he had not noticed back in the basement. He was glad that the wound seemed to have healed—it would be much harder to talk to her if she was just a disembodied head. Hero turned to her with a polite smile.

“I see that neck wound healed up. I’m glad—that was a nasty piece of work you did. Still, I suppose it worked, right?” he offered.

She barely looked at him, just glancing out of the side of her eyes before turning back to face the wall across from them both. Somehow, Hero knew what she was going to say before she even opened her mouth.

“I thought I told you that I don’t like small talk.”

Hero gaped at her for a moment, his brain short-circuiting from her blunt response. A rare touch of anger rose within him.

“I see you’re still as rude as ever,” he muttered under his breath. For a moment, he had forgotten that he was no longer just a voice in someone else’s head, and that the person he was referring to could now hear him. He was swiftly reminded when she sharply turned to face him, a withering glare threatening to cut him down where he sat.

“No worse than telling someone how rude she is to her face,” she shot back, a cutting edge to her voice. It reminded Hero far too much of the feeling of chains wrapped around his neck, of cold stone beneath his back, and her furious face staring down at him as she throttled the life out of his body.

Hero’s face burned once again as shame and embarrassment bubbled up within him. She was rude, yes, but so was he, and it was only right that he apologized. Besides, she’d been

through a lot—he knew that as well as anyone, since he saw it all. He decided to put aside for the moment just how much *he'd* been through too.

“I’m sorry, that *was* rude of me. Could we please start over? I’d like to meet properly, now that we’re not at risk of killing each other,” he said, one hand rubbing the back of his neck as he grinned awkwardly.

She looked at him flatly for a long moment, and he worried for a second that she would refuse. Instead, she sighed and turned her body in her chair to face him properly. She picked up the edges of her dress in a slight curtsy and nodded her head.

“You may call me ‘Your Majesty’ or ‘Your Royal Highness.’ What might your name be?”

Hero stood from his chair, then bowed far too deeply and overdramatically, his forehead making its best attempt at touching the ground.

“I don’t have a name, but it is a pleasure to formally meet you, Your Majesty. I assure you, this time I am *not* here to slay you.”

As Hero rose from his bow and retook his seat, he saw what appeared to be a glimmer of a smile just touching the corners of Prisoner’s lips and perhaps just a tiny spark of laughter in her eyes. Hero smiled slightly in return, and though her face quickly returned to its usual stony glower, it was not quite as harsh as before.

With their shared moment of humor came a release of the tension between them, and Hero finally caught something that Prisoner had mentioned earlier but which had gone unnoticed in his annoyance.

“Wait—I thought you Vessels only remember the things you saw yourselves? The things that happened in your own version of events?” Hero asked, puzzlement written plainly across his face.

Prisoner was many things, and sharp was chief among of them. She realized immediately what he was really asking before he even got a chance to say it aloud.

“You’re wondering how I can both remember chopping off my head and sitting next to you for eternity?” she asked, as if to confirm, but she carried on without giving Hero a chance to even respond. He guessed she didn’t really need him to.

“To be honest, I don’t really understand it myself. What makes us Vessels separate, or what makes us the same. Our identities, and what we really are—it’s hard to wrap my head around.”

As she spoke, her stoic façade slipped for a moment, and Hero noticed that she looked...not quite sad, but lost. Like something within her ached, or she was incomplete. Hero was not quite as quick as some of the other Voices, but even he could read the Prisoner well enough to see it. He nodded in understanding, then decided to share his own thoughts.

“I know what you mean. At least you’ve always been a *person*—I was only a disembodied voice until very recently, just trying to guide someone and keep him from getting killed. Now I have a body but nothing to do with it. I have no purpose. It feels...off.”

Hero just barely managed to restrain himself from saying that it felt *wrong*. He wasn’t ungrateful—far from it. The simple act of sitting here, in a chair, talking to the Princess and being truly *alive* brought him more joy than he ever thought possible. He supposed not getting threatened with death at every turn helped.

But that didn’t change the fact there was a gaping pit somewhere inside him, howling at the edges of his soul. He knew, deep within him, that if he thought too hard about it—if he looked over the edge—then it would grow to swallow him entirely. His very self would be nothing more than water spiraling down a drain until not even a drop was left.

So, he tried not to think about it.

“Yes. That’s exactly what I feel.” She sighed wearily. “After I worked so hard just to escape, just to survive, I was looking forward to actually getting a chance to live my own life, free from that basement. Then...well, you know what happened.”

Hero didn’t think he’d ever heard the Prisoner say so much at once in the entire time he’d known her. He stayed silent, letting her speak her mind as she continued, her cover slipping as the dam broke and she let out her true feelings.

“And do you want to know the worst part? Being a part of her—being melded with all of the other Vessels—it felt *good*. It felt *right*. Like it was what I was really looking for all along, and just didn’t realize it. But I was angry and, honestly, a good deal afraid—of what I was a part of. Of what I *was*. So I abandoned it, and now I’m here. Trapped in the basement again, safe but...incomplete.”

“It’s almost ironic, isn’t it?” Hero asked after a moment. “We’ve come so far from where we started, and yet it’s all the same. It’s like we’re telling the same story, over and over again. You, trapped in the basement all over again. Us, coming in to change things. For better or for worse.”

She seemed to contemplate his words. Even though Hero struggled to read her expressions, she still seemed relieved to have gotten her emotions out into the world. He supposed restraining her feelings so tightly came with a cost.

And then Prisoner stayed quiet. An awkward silence hung in the air now. When Hero glanced at her to ask a question, he noticed that she had suddenly become very still, her face having returned to its usual stony glower. He struggled for a moment to find the cause of her sudden change in personality.

He ultimately decided that she must be as exhausted as he was, and unlike him, she was unused to dealing with people for very long. All of their prior interactions had either been incredibly short and violent, or long and utterly quiet. Either way, she had never had to deal with sustained conversation before. She might even be somewhat embarrassed from sharing so many of her private emotions with him so suddenly.

He thought quietly for a moment, then made a decision.

“I suppose I should be leaving. I’m sure the others are getting into some kind of trouble, and somebody needs to keep things sane around here,” he said, standing up from the table and stretching his back. Her eyes flickered in his direction, her expression almost grateful, and he smiled slightly at having his suspicions confirmed. It was oddly comforting to find a crack in that armor of stoic silence; it was a pleasant reminder that she was still a person, fragment of a chaotic god or no.

“I’ll see you around,” he offered, and she gave a small polite nod. Then he opened one of the many doors branching from the main hall at random and went to find his fellows.

## Chapter End Notes

Phew! This chapter has been written for a long while (a couple of months at least), but it still needed a few edits before I could post it. We’re about two-thirds of the way through now!

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

Content warning: canon-typical violence

It's a Stubborn and Adversary chapter. What else do you expect?

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

Stubborn charged down the hallway, hot on Adversary's heels. He moved quickly and purposefully, fast enough to catch up with her but steadily enough that he would not exhaust himself before their grand battle. His heart pounded in his chest, and he did his best to convince himself it was only excitement that made the sound drum in his ears.

The hallway seemed to stretch infinitely far from him, the gaping doorway at its end an insurmountable distance away. Yet all too soon, he stood before it, and finally he saw the woman who waited for him just beyond the door.

She was beautiful, with a joyous grin of sharp teeth and eyes full of bloodlust, her entire body almost quivering with anticipation for the violence she would soon inflict upon him—and he upon her. Her smile somehow widened when he stepped through the doorway, and she did not wait a moment longer before throwing the first punch.

It was almost a casual thing, more like a friendly greeting than an actual attack, but he knew very well that any one of her blows could kill if he tried to take it head-on. He wore his own smile like a shield as he ducked beneath the blow while lunging forward, narrowing the gap between them and joining her in their final battle.

The last time they had fought properly, it lasted until the end of the world. Now they did not have to worry about such a little thing interrupting them again.

Their fight began fantastically. Stubborn blocked the blows he could, dodged the ones he could not, and always retaliated in kind. He was doing far better than the last time the Voices had faced the Adversary in unarmed combat. Before, they needed the blade just to stand a chance against her, but Stubborn was now unhindered by Hero's fear, the Narrator's lies, or the Long Quiet's hesitation. He was finally able to keep up with her without the need for any kind of crutch.

Even so, it was not long before Adversary's wide smile began to drop and shift into a look of confusion. Her puzzlement disappeared even quicker than her joy, and her uncertain expression was replaced by a furious snarl.

She stopped suddenly, and when his fist launched forward to take advantage of her dropped guard, she caught it easily and looked at his hand with something resembling disgust.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

“What?” he replied, confused.

“Your heart isn’t in it, not like it was back in the basement. You’re not trying to kill me anymore! You’d better not be letting me win!”

Adversary’s rage built on itself with every word, compounding and escalating until she wrenched him forward by the arm she still held in her iron grip and swung another deadly blow. He blocked it desperately, his guard all wrong in his surprise. His bones groaned in agony from the attack, but he pushed past the pain and gave her his reply.

“Of course not!” he growled, pulling free the arm she held onto and slamming his knee home into her stomach. His genuine anger and hurt that she would suggest such a thing fueled his blow, and she doubled over at the unexpected force. Stubborn planted his feet solidly and twisted his body, putting his entire weight into his now-free fist as he swung it at her face before she could recover.

At the last moment, she ducked her head and forced his knuckles to slam into her bony horns and skull. He felt something in his fingers crack, but he ignored the pain once again as he stepped back to try a different tactic. Before he could, Adversary straightened back up with a wide grin and swung her hand up, catching him by the neck and lifting him from the ground.

Stubborn never got a chance to react before she slammed him bodily into the floor and knocked the wind from his lungs. She kneeled beside him and held him there, pinned to the ground, their faces almost touching and their breaths mingling as they both panted heavily.

“That was better!” she growled, her voice laced with renewed excitement. Stubborn gave a bloody smile, but she continued, her tone becoming quiet and oddly serious. “But you’re still holding back. If you aren’t letting me win, then what is it? What’s changed?”

Stubborn looked into her eyes, and behind the rage and bloodlust, he saw genuine worry and pain, unlike anything he had seen during their many fights before. He could only recall one moment that even approached the hurt expression she wore now: the look of grief and horror in her eyes when she was forced to put the Voices down after they failed to fight her unarmed.

But this time was different; he was able to keep up with her, and she knew it. The problem lay not in his ability, but in his motivation. If anything, that hurt her more.

Stubborn let loose a resigned sigh, and his false bravado disappeared. He had wanted to give her the perfect fight he knew she wanted, but he had failed. He owed her an explanation, at the very least.

“Back in the basement, I attacked you in a moment of pure, unthinking passion. I was so overjoyed to see you again that I couldn’t help myself, and I had no room in my mind for doubts,” he explained. “But on the way here, I had time to think, and those doubts crept in.”



She was listening intently, her expression more focused than he had ever seen outside of combat. He spoke faster, his words tumbling out as he tried to convey his thoughts and feelings as quickly as he could.

“Before I found the others outside the basement, it was a struggle just to move through the forest. The world itself was fighting my every step, and at first, I *relished* the challenge!” His Voice momentarily regained its former pride and power, but it disappeared in a moment once again. “But all too soon it turned...hollow. Worthless. Eventually, I surrendered and resigned myself to death.”

Her face was awash with surprise and sorrow. Stubborn could not tell if it was for the hurt he knew his words were causing her, or for his own pain at what he had to say.

“That fight was *wrong*, and it was wrong because it had no *purpose*.” he growled, and she flinched back at his words. “There was no way to win. When I was fighting, I was just staving off the inevitable, and none of it really mattered in the end.”

He gave a tired sigh, his energy spent, before he continued.

“I only managed to pull myself out because I realized that I had a reason to: I needed to find the others, to make sure they were safe. Now that they are, I no longer have a reason to fight.”

Stubborn’s voice turned pleading as he begged her to understand his words.

“I cherish the memories of our battles from before. I don’t want to ruin them by chasing that feeling when it’s already dead. By forcing a fight that has no point.”

“No point?” she murmured quietly, taking a moment to process what he had said. “NO POINT?” she roared, when her mind caught up with her mouth. She lifted Stubborn back off the ground and prepared to throw him against the wall, but hesitated, instead just dropping him on the ground and storming to the other side of the room. While he tried to find his breath from where it had been knocked out of him, she turned back around and growled her thoughts to him, a mixture of fury and sorrow and fear and pain all coming together to fuel her voice.

“The *point* is that *this*, here and now, you and I, is the only thing that matters! The point is that we were made for this! We were made for *each other*. Without this I’m nothing! Without this *nothing* is *anything*; the world is empty and grey and nothing!”

She paused. The room was silent but for her panting and his wheezing. Stubborn slowly got to his feet and met her eyes as she stared at him, a single line of tears running down her cheek. He was surprised to realize that sweat and blood were not the only things wetting his own face, either.

“Don’t you feel the same?” she finally asked, desperately.

“I do! But—”

“There is no ‘but’! Do you want to fight me, or not?” she demanded. She took a step forward as if to charge at him yet again, but stopped, hesitating. Waiting for his answer, unwilling to continue their dance if there was even a touch of uncertainty in his mind.

Stubborn thought for a long minute and looked deep within himself. The truth was tangled in so much fear, it was hard to find, but still he searched.

He was not afraid of her, of course—she was his partner, his equal. He was not even afraid of dying. Even before he knew that he would come back, death did not frighten him.

However, the despair he felt back in the woods was so great and shook him so deeply that it cracked something in the very core of his identity. The thought of feeling that way again filled him with a deep-seated dread that ached in his very bones. He was terrified that any attempt to fight Adversary would soon feel as pointless as the battle in the woods and deprive him of even the slightest chance of purpose in this new world, that even his treasured memories of their past battles would be stripped away from him and tainted by the attempt to recreate them.

Stubborn searched further. Deep beneath all that fear and doubt, he eventually realized that he *did* want to fight her. He wanted a rematch more than anything else in the world; he wanted his heart to pound and his bones to ache and to forget about the world around him entirely, to lose sight of everything but the woman before him, and to know that she felt the same.

But despite his hopes and his desires, he still felt those fears, and for them he had no answer.

“What if—” he started again, but she cut him off all the same with a violent shake of her head.

“There is no ‘IF’” she growled with disdain, not for him, but for his uncertainty. “There is only HERE and NOW. *Do you want to fight me?*”

Stubborn let loose a growl of frustration. He didn’t want to do this anymore—this thinking, this doubting, this debating with himself. He just wanted to fight her. Why was that so complicated?

He wished he could return to how life was before the battle with the woods broke his will, before he was so full of doubt. But he could still feel those vines wrapping around him in the forest, weighing him down and suffocating him under the weight of his own despair. Worse than all the fear and the pain was the *pointlessness* of even trying to resist, to escape.

But would he really let the forest control him? If he abandoned his one remaining joy out of fear, would the forest not have won?

Stubborn took a deep breath, the way he had seen Paranoid and Hunted do many times when they began to drown in their fears, and he strained to look past the dread that tried to blind him, tried to bind him to that feeling in the forest.

Stubborn knew that, in his heart of hearts, his fears were not real. The only thing left before him was his long-awaited battle with the woman he wanted to spend eternity with. The vines

were gone. His doubts were merely another obstacle to be overcome, and they were nothing compared to the challenges he had faced in his many lives with the Princesses.

Maybe one day those fears would be realized and his battle with Adversary would become stale and pointless. Maybe that would never happen. But he could not allow an uncertain future to force him to abandon a glorious and joyful present. Stubborn finally had his answer to Adversary's question.

Stubborn took one last deep breath and allowed the last of his fear to wash away. He could not allow himself any distractions, any hesitation. He would give his Adversary the battle they had both been waiting for, and it would be perfect. For the first time since he charged down the hallway after her, Stubborn felt truly excited, and his eyes gleamed as a wide grin stretched across his face.

Adversary saw Stubborn's sudden change and in a heartbeat her own smile returned. Before she could react, however, he lunged forward from the floor and slammed into her legs, the combination of impact and surprise allowing him to knock her to the ground.

They both landed heavy on the stone floor, but for the moment he had the advantage of surprise. He raised his arms above his head and prepared to launch a devastating blow, but she recovered far quicker than he expected.

In an instant her powerful arms wrapped tightly around his torso and began to squeeze. They tightened like a noose that, if not broken, would quickly rupture organs and shatter bones. Stubborn was pulled face-to-face with his Adversary once again, and they grinned at each other. Their eyes were wide, but they saw little—no stone floor, no basement walls, nothing. The only thing they could see was the other's face and bloody smile.

"Maybe one day we'll find a limit, but until then, you aren't allowed to give up on this. Not out of fear for something that hasn't happened yet. I won't let you 'resign yourself to death' that easily," his Adversary whispered. "And if one day, fighting does feel like it has no point, we'll face that future together. I'm with you until the end."

Instead of speaking, Stubborn showed his gratitude by using what little range of motion he still had to rear back his head and whip it forwards. His forehead slammed into her nose with a sickening crunch, and her death grip loosened for just a moment. He was free, and their dance began once again.

## Chapter End Notes

After writing and rewriting, I finally managed to get this chapter to a place I was happy with! I think Stubborn is the most challenging of the Voices to write, because he fits his name so well—I know how I want his character to develop, and he refuses to go the direction I've chosen. It takes a lot of work to make him change, but I finally succeeded.

Now push on! To celebrate the Pristine Cut coming out in two days, I've posted two chapters! I hope you enjoy :)

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Cold ambled slowly down one of the many branching hallways of his new home. He was, to put it bluntly, bored. This place reminded him far too much of the Narrator's little trick of a "reward", and much like then, he was...dissatisfied. He was looking for anything that might catch his interest.

Suddenly, all along his back he felt a gentle chill, as soft as snowfall. It felt almost as if icy fingers had traced down his shoulder and across his spine, but when he turned to look, he only saw a glimmer of pale white flesh disappearing through a wall, right beside a wooden door. A shiver washed through him, his reaction to the cold delayed just a moment by his confusion.

Cold considered his next course of action. On the one hand, a mysterious figure in an already mysterious place was possibly dangerous. On the other hand, Cold was reasonably certain he knew who the figure was. He was also bored and not particularly concerned with the threat of death or pain on the best of days.

He opened the door with barely a moment of hesitation.

Inside was a room intimately familiar to him. It was much like the original basement, but far dustier, with cobwebs dancing in the corners and a slight chill in the air. He knew it—and its singular occupant—quite well.

In the center of the room floated a pale white woman, seemingly unaffected by gravity. Her white hair floated and rippled behind her as if she was underwater, and her icy eyes stared at him with an unexpected intensity.

"Hiya killer."

The words slipped through Spectre's grinning lips, her tone surprisingly warm considering she was the source of the cold that filled the room.

Cold's face was a neutral mask as he stared directly into Spectre's eyes, ignoring her piercing gaze.

"I take it this room is your doing. I assumed you would never have wanted to see these walls again," he said.

Her head tilted to the side in confusion, and she twirled around as if looking at the room's interior for the first time. When she turned to face Cold again, her hair kept moving for a few seconds, covering her face until she shoved it out of the way again. Cold would almost have called it cute, if he cared to describe it at all.

“I didn’t make this room. You did! Does that mean you missed me?” she asked mischievously.

“What do you mean?”

Spectre pouted playfully as Cold dodged her question, but she decided to answer his anyway. She floated closer to him as she replied.

“This whole place is made of one of the Long Quiet’s feathers, so it doesn’t want to change very much. But now that it’s inside us, it’s a bit more...flexible. Just like the Vessels, it becomes what you think it is—so I guess you could say it’s made of both of us, now. Shifting Mound and Long Quiet, together.”

“You’re saying that because I expected the room to look like this, it does?”

He was straight to the point as usual, and Spectre nodded simply.

Cold cocked his head to the side in thought, before sitting down in the chair that he knew for certain was right behind him. The old wood creaked slightly as he suddenly slumped into it, but it was solid beneath him, just as he imagined it.

Spectre gave quiet applause at the feat, and the corner of Cold’s mouth twitched in something resembling satisfaction at the furniture he had willed into existence.

“You sure got the hang of that fast,” Spectre said as he stood again. He did not bother to check and confirm that the chair had disappeared—he was confident it had.

Silence hung in the air for a long moment at the pair stared at each other. Cold knew that Spectre must have been there for a reason and that she wanted to make him ask her. Both had the patience to wait a very long time to get their way, but Cold was not too proud to simply ask, and he had no reason to drag the pause out any longer.

“What are you doing here?”

Spectre smiled slightly at Cold’s concession.

“I came to see you, of course. The rest of us heard what you said earlier. That even you loved us all along. I wanted to see if that was true.”

“Are you saying you think I lied? And why didn’t you show up earlier, if you’re so curious?”

“Are you saying you would never, ever lie to us?” Spectre shot back with a grin.

Cold tilted his head, conceding the point.

“And it wasn’t the right time before,” she continued, taking on a more serious tone. “The other vessels and your fellow shards were too tense—I would have only made things worse. Now, stop deflecting and answer my question,” she finished, staring at him expectantly, her eyes trying to stare into his soul.

Cold matched her intense gaze with his dispassionate one while trying to decide how best to answer her. He briefly considered lying, saying that what he had said before was just a calculated deception to calm things down. He wondered if she would merely pout, or if she would become enraged and kill him again.

Eventually, he decided to tell the truth. While lying now might be briefly entertaining, he did not want to waste the energy on a convincing deception when the truth could be just as interesting in the long run.

“I wasn’t lying. Back then, we were just reflections of him—the Long Quiet. We were echoes of his own feelings, though touched by our own unique perspectives. You once called us pieces of broken glass—if that’s the case, I guess you could say we mirrored his own thoughts, but we added our own colors to them.”

“So...you love us?” Spectre asked cheekily.

Cold merely shrugged.

“The Long Quiet does, certainly. And I do feel drawn to the Vessels, in a way. I crave stimulation, and if nothing else, your myriad incarnations were never boring.”

Though Cold’s voice was calm and almost stale, Spectre listened with focused intensity. She caught something he had said and furrowed her eyebrows in confusion.

“You said ‘back then’ a moment ago. Is all of that no longer true?” she asked.

“Not quite. Things feel different now. I think I’m more than I was before, like my thoughts and feelings are actually my own, instead of just reflections of someone else. Nothing has really changed about me or how I feel, and yet I’m fundamentally altered. I can’t imagine it’s any different for the others.”

Spectre thought for a moment, then spoke.

“I think I know what you’re feeling. When we Vessels merged and became the Shifting Mound, we grew as individuals too. I guess you did the same thing when you separated from the Long Quiet and were reunited with all of your prior lives.”

A silence hung in the air as the two fragments of ancient, primordial beings pondered their new existences and contemplated their realities. Once again, it was Cold who broke the silence.

“What’s it like, being a part of her?” he asked.

Spectre cocked her head to the side, a thoughtful expression on her face before she lit up in a warm smile. For being dead and icy cold, she was remarkably happy. Cold again pushed away his guilt at all the times they had slain her, trying to maintain the dispassion that had begun to crack back in the woods. Not even he could be ice in the face of her warmth.

“Well, if you used to be a broken piece of glass, then we’re more like a piece of a larger picture, like a puzzle. All of us add different shapes and colors, but we make one unified

whole. We fit together, I guess. This is where I belong.”

Cold looked up at the ceiling, his face a stoic mask as usual. While he thought, Spectre’s feet left the ground, and she tried to float as close as possible to him before he noticed. After a while, Cold looked down at her, their faces almost touching. He did not react at all to her proximity, and she puffed her cheeks in annoyance when she realized her prank had failed.

“That sounds nice.”

Cold’s voice was perfectly normal, devoid of any emotion, and it was impossible to speculate about anything he might have been thinking, yet something about his words made Spectre suspicious. Her head was tilted to the other side now, propped up on her hands, and her legs floated up behind her until it looked as if she was lying on an invisible surface.

“It really is. Why’d you want to know?”

“Just curious.”

Spectre stared at Cold for a long moment, floating mere inches from his face as she gazed intently into his eyes. Despite the chill stinging his eyes, he managed to maintain and match her stare.

Even most of the other Voices would struggle to guess Cold’s emotions—if they even realized they existed—and any other Vessel would be doomed to failure. But Spectre had an advantage: she had been in his head. She knew how he thought as well as any Voice.

She was also one of the many Vessels watching over the Voices while they struggled through the Shifting Mound’s woods outside of the basement. She had seen how Cold acted when he was briefly trapped with Paranoid, and that scene had given her a hunch. She suspected that he felt more than he let on, and what she saw in his eyes confirmed it.

“Something’s changed. You’re not nearly as emotionless as you were before, are you?”

Cold’s face stayed perfectly still, but his silence was as much confirmation as anything he could have said. Eventually, Spectre broke the quiet, her oddly serious tone at odds with her formerly playful demeanor.

“I forgive you.”

“That’s not why I was asking.”

Cold’s attempt to defend himself was waved away.

“No? Well, I wanted to say it anyway. Even the angry Vessels are grateful. You chose to make us whole, in the end, and that’s all that matters.”

“I didn’t do anything. I just gave advice; it was him who made the decisions.”

“Then why do you feel guilty?”



“I don—”

“Fine! Why are you *ignoring* that you feel guilty?” she cut his argument off once again. For a moment, her face twisted with annoyance, becoming a rotten corpse-grin as she stared at him with lidless eyes. In a blink, her normal smile was back, kind and sorrowful.

They stood there like that for a moment, staring at each other. Cold could refute nothing she had said, as much as he wanted to, and she had no desire to press the issue further. Eventually, Spectre floated towards him slowly and reached out her arms. When Cold did not move to stop her, she wrapped herself around him in an embrace.

Her familiar freezing cold was like a blanket of fog across his torso, just as strong as when she had possessed the Long Quiet’s body. It was not painful; in fact, it was surprisingly comfortable. If it lasted too long, Cold felt he would even fall asleep in her arms, the gentle chill demanding that he rest, relax, and let his mind drift away.

She held on for almost a minute before letting go and floating off. Still, they did not break the silence as Cold stared into space, looking through her as much as at her. His mind was elsewhere, trying to deal with the tumultuous emotions that now surged beneath the surface of his mind, like water below a half-frozen river.

Eventually, Spectre began to slowly float to the wall of the room. She was ready to return to the Shifting Mound’s embrace, and she had accomplished what she set out to do. But as she reached out to the wall, and it reached out to her in turn, a quiet voice brushed against her ears. It was soft and cold, but she could sense the silent feeling running deep beneath its words.

“Thank you.”

She turned and smiled, once again brightening the otherwise dour place, then allowed herself to be pulled into the wall. And as Cold turned and left the room behind him, he felt that maybe the core of ice in his heart was perhaps just a sliver smaller than it was when he entered.

## Chapter End Notes

I wrote the first iteration of this chapter all the way back in February. It was literally the second chapter I wrote, after Chapter 1. It's fundamentally the same, with only a few tweaks here and there to make it flow better and fit with the chapters I've written since. I can't believe I've been working on this for almost a whole year--I started planning and writing back in December. It's been slow going, but so much fun!

Side note, one of my reviewers who has never played STP but is really good at making sure stories flow well read this and immediately asked "Is Spectre your favorite princess?"

I wrote the story, but I'm the one that got read like a book.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Paranoid almost jumped out of his skin when the room's only door opened with a sudden crash. He turned with a start to face the noise but was blinded by the sudden influx of light through the open doorway into the previously pitch-black room. He stood there staring at the silhouette of the intruder in between rapid blinks as he desperately tried to regain his sight.

Hunted recovered slightly faster, having heard the approaching footsteps moments before the door slammed open. He was still forced to look through squinted and watering eyes, but he recognized the source of the disturbance almost immediately. He patted Paranoid on the shoulder reassuringly.

"It's okay. It's one of us," he muttered quietly before retaking his seat against the wall.

The new Voice, having had a similar fright when he realized the room was not as empty as he first expected, stepped inside before turning and shutting the door with slightly more grace than he had opened it. He sat just inside the room, his back against the door, and gave a quiet sigh of relief.

"What are you *doing*?" Paranoid hissed quietly.

"Apparently, I'm avoiding the Princesses in a pitch-black room with you two," Cheated replied in a normal volume, much to Paranoid and Hunted's displeasure.

"Well, you could at least be *quiet* about it," Paranoid whispered again after a moment.

"I do wish the room was a bit brighter, though," Cheated muttered to himself, ignoring the nervous Voice's complaint.

The room almost instantly brightened. It was the perfect level of illumination; just light enough to see comfortably, but not so much so that the pair of skittish Voices were worried about the light being seen through the crack beneath the door. Cheated immediately scowled at the walls, and the other two Voices were no happier about the sudden change.

"Great. Even in an empty room I feel like we're being watched. Why can't we just be in a normal place for once in our lives?!" he snarled.

"I don't think that 'normal' really exists. At least, not for us," Paranoid answered, his voice hushed, though not as frantic as it usually was.

Cheated only replied with a noncommittal grunt.

There was a brief pause as the Voices finished recovering from their mutual shocks before Paranoid spoke.

“Did you happen to see any of the others out there?” the skittish Voice asked, almost sounding worried about his fellow Voices.

“What? Oh, right—I bet you’ve been hiding here for a while, haven’t you? Yeah, I saw the others.

“The curious one and the cold one are both exploring. The angry one is fighting, of course, and the last time I saw Loverboy, he was making doe-eyes at one of the Princesses. I haven’t seen the mopey one in a while, but I think we can all guess what he’s doing. The annoying one is clearly planning something, but his lips are sealed tight. I just know we’ll find out whatever it is when it’s most inconvenient.” Paranoid and Hunted both groaned slightly at this announcement, neither of them excited by the thought of Contrarian’s idea of humor. Cheated made his own scowl of shared displeasure, then continued.

“The backstabber is planning something too. Or I assume he is—I think he’s looking for something, or someone, but you know how he is. I don’t think he’d go out of his way to hurt any of us without a good reason, but, well...he can be too clever for anyone’s good sometimes.

“Lastly, our self-appointed ‘big brother’ is going around checking on everyone and making sure everything’s okay. Or at least, as okay as things *can* be, when we’re surrounded by murderers!”

Cheated spat out these last words, his voice having risen from a low volume to a near shout as he said the last sentence, then gave an annoyed sigh.

Paranoid tried to ignore how loud his fellow Voice had gotten during the ranting. He told himself that anything or anyone near enough to hear it had probably already noticed the slamming door earlier, so further stealth was likely pointless. His reassurances helped, a little.

On the other hand, Hunted was surprisingly unconcerned with the noise; somehow, he had the distinct sense that any nearby eyes or ears were directed *away* from the group.

“So basically, it seems like everyone has forgotten that we’re currently living inside the body of a giant goddess made out of thousands of Princesses who’ve tried, and succeeded, in killing us over and over again, often in horrible and painful ways. It’s like they’ve all gone mad!” Cheated said, exasperated.

His rant over, Cheated felt heavy with exhaustion, the stress of avoiding the Princesses while looking for a safe place to hide mingling with his irritation and confusion at his fellow Voices’ actions.

“But at least you two are sane enough to get away from it all, at least as much as possible,” he finished, almost hopefully.

“I know what you mean. How can the others just...*trust* them? After everything they did to us, how can they just pretend everything is fine?” Paranoid whispered his reply.

For the first time since Cheated had entered the room, Hunted spoke. He was more confident than usual, his Voice a little stronger than usual—although not without its feral edge.

“Why shouldn’t they?” the wild Voice asked. “It’s not like there’s anything left to fear from the Princesses. We’re safe here.”

“I’m not so sure that’s true,” Cheated spat. “You haven’t met some of the ones I have. That mean one from earlier is both willing and able to make our lives a living hell if she wants to—and you all saw just how much she wanted to!”

Paranoid nodded his head, wagging his finger in combined agreement and realization.

“He’s right. And you saw how that other one came out of the wall—any of the Princesses we’ve ever met could pop out of nowhere. I wouldn’t be surprised if one of the truly awful ones is waiting to do just that when we least expect it!”

Paranoid and Cheated were both in a frenzy now, their joint suspicion and venom towards the Princesses combining to fuel each other in a never-ending vicious cycle. Paranoid’s eyes were so wide with terror that Hunted could see the whites from across the room, while Cheated’s were narrowed with spiteful suspicion and preemptive plans for revenge.

If left unchecked, the pair would either convince each other to do something stupid out of fear or start running from imagined threats down the endless hallways of their new home. In either case, Hunted knew he had to interfere.

“That’s not going to happen,” he said, his voice loud enough to echo in the small room. The darkness that had begun creeping from the edges and corners, unnoticed by all but Hunted, receded almost immediately. The pair of Voices snapped out of their spiral and their eyes shot to him, surprised at both his volume and his confidence.

“How can you know that?” Paranoid whispered. His voice was desperate and strained and exhausted, pushing itself from his throat like a drowning person struggling through the water towards the only land in sight. Paranoid wanted so desperately to trust his fellow Voice, but it was just so much easier to surrender to the fear, to believe that the world would be just as cruel and painful as it had always been before.

“How could you possibly be sure?” Cheated snarled. Unlike Paranoid, he was far less trusting of his fellow Voice. He sounded less like a desperate castaway and more like a cornered animal, fear driving his ferocity such that he would continue to fight even when defeat was certain, if for no other reason than to spite the victor.

But Hunted’s tone was calm, and even that subtle sign reassured his fellows.

“This place isn’t a prison meant to trap us or make us suffer—it exists to protect us while we live out the rest of our days doing whatever it is we wish. We’re safe here.”

“But that’s what *she* said,” Cheated replied.

“What makes you think we can trust *her*,” Paranoid finished the thought.

“Listen,” Hunted answered simply. It was not quite an order or demand—none of the Voices had the kind of authority to force any of the others to do anything—but Hunted was the kind of Voice whose suggestions should be listened to, especially when it came to matters of survival.

There was almost a full minute of silence while the other Voices strained their ears, searching for whatever Hunted must have noticed, practically holding their breaths the entire time. Eventually Cheated, hearing nothing, spoke.

“I don’t hear any—”

“Shh. *Listen*,” Hunted repeated, cutting him off. Cheated scowled but stayed silent.

The Voices were utterly quiet, each of them listening for...something. Paranoid was the first to realize what it was.

“There’s nothing there,” the skittish Voice said. He was certain that was why Hunted had told them to listen, but he could not understand *why*. What was so important about the silence?

“So what? The room is quiet, what does that have to do with anything?” Cheated asked, putting Paranoid’s thoughts into words.

Hunted sighed quietly at being forced to explain. He did not like using words, but his instincts were sharper than his fellows, so he had no choice but to make clear to them what had been so obvious to him.

“There is no Narrator pushing ourselves to violence, or Decider choosing what happens for us, or other Voices in our head pulling us in a dozen different directions. The world is quiet, our thoughts and actions are our own. We are free to make decisions for ourselves.”

His words were starting to sink in, but the other Voices were not convinced. Hunted continued.

“If the most dangerous Princesses from our memories wanted to torment us even now, they would have done so already. We would have heard or seen something by now from at least one of them. Do you think the bladed one has the patience to wait this long to attack us? So, they’re either uninterested in hurting us more, or they’re somehow contained. Either way, we’re safe.”

“I don’t believe it,” Cheated spat. “It’s too easy. Life has never been that kind to us, not once.”

“Of course,” Paranoid agreed quietly. “They’re probably just waiting until the right moment, to give us hope and then strip it away as soon as we’re comfortable.”

“That sounds like something those monsters would do,” Cheated snarled. “The ones we met already are probably just there to give us a false sense of security so we drop our guards. Well, that’s not happening on my watch!”

The pair of Voices had momentarily calmed down while Hunted spoke, but almost immediately they began whipping themselves into a frenzy once again. It was like they were trapped in a rut, unable to imagine the world being any different from what they had always known.

The darkness crept in from the edges once again, just as slowly as the first time. Considering how quickly the world usually adapted to their thoughts, some part of Hunted wondered if something was resisting that particular change. Whatever the reason, he was grateful that he had the time to calm his fellows down before it swallowed them. While he knew their new home was not actively malicious like the other Voices may have feared, he was not so foolish as to think it was *harmless*.

He could not judge them too harshly, though; he knew just how hard it was for the Voices to escape their natures. He still struggled to push down the fear that threatened to overwhelm him, to sink into the small part of his mind that saw each room as a trap and every shadow as a threat. The very instincts he once relied on for survival still screamed that he was *prey*, and it was hard to ignore them.

The woods had helped, some; they made him realize that his instincts could not be trusted to guide his every action, that no matter how much of a struggle it was, sometimes he had to stop and *think*. He guessed that the other Voices had experienced something similar to his trial in the woods—he could tell they were all slightly different than he recalled from before. A little healthier perhaps, the ruts they each were trapped in made a little shallower, a little easier to escape. Some of them just needed a little more time to finish healing from all the harm they had experienced. He just had to make sure they did not do something stupid in the meantime. Not that it would be easy.

After a few more moments of Paranoid and Cheated riling each other up even more, Hunted finally found the words he needed.

“You’re too caught up in what happened before. All that matters is *now*. Stop and think. If you forget everything that happened before we appeared in the woods, what would you think happens now? Ignore the past; what does the *present* tell you?” he said calmly, hoping that his tone would help them understand his words.

Surprisingly, the pair of frantic Voices listened once again, if even for a moment. They were still tense and uneasy, but they were willing to hear what he had to say and think before acting rashly. They really were healing, after all. Before, there would be nothing Hunted or anyone else could do to calm the pair down.

“What...what do you mean?” Paranoid asked cautiously, his tone once again a mixture of hopeful and desperate.

“You’re still thinking this place is like the woods, where everything was always trying to hurt you. But it isn’t—this is a new environment. All the thoughts and feelings and patterns that make you who you are were carved to fit the space we were in before. But we aren’t there anymore. If you don’t adapt to our new home, you’ll be trapped in the past forever.”

Paranoid was always quick, for better or for worse. He realized immediately what Hunted was talking about.

“This whole place is part of the Princess now, and she changed to fit whatever we thought of her. If we think things are the same as they were before, that will become true,” the nervous Voice muttered, the idea leaving his mouth almost as soon as he thought of it.

Paranoid’s eyes widened with a sudden fear, as if he was remembering a terrible memory from a long time ago, and the frightened Voice opened his mouth as if to speak again. Then he swallowed the words, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. When his eyes opened again, the fear was deeply buried, though Hunted was certain it was still present. That emotion was as much a part of the Voice as his feathers or scales, Hunted knew—it would never disappear forever. But that made his ability to press past the fear and move forward regardless even more inspiring.

Calm once again, Paranoid finished his original thought before he recalled whatever dreadful memory it was that distracted him, his Voice straining with the intense calm he was channeling.

“But we have an opportunity to start fresh—to make this place something *new*.”

Cheated was hesitant. It all felt too *easy* to him, like he was just waiting for the other shoe to drop and squash them all. But if these other two, the most fearful and anxious Voices he knew, could trust that things could be better...maybe they were right.

His mind flashed, unbidden, to the Princess. Some of them were truly monstrous, only trying to hurt them and make their lives a living hell. But sometimes, with the very rare version of her, things got better. The thorny Princess he saw earlier was one such example—sure, sometimes things went to shit with her, but that was always *their* fault for messing them up. If they just took the offered hand, they could pull each other up together. Much like a certain slimeball Voice had done once, oh so recently—and if *that* traitorous bastard could change, maybe so could everything else.

With the image of his fellow Voice reaching down to him in his mind, Cheated made a decision. It was not easy, certainly, but change rarely was. Maybe things *could* be better, after all—and if there was the slightest chance that it was possible, he would do his damndest to make it work.

After a moment, Cheated laughed almost deliriously, the sudden loud sound causing the pair of other Voices to jump slightly in surprise. They were worried for a moment that Cheated had gone mad, when the laughter abruptly ended, and he spoke.

“Sure! Fine. Let’s join the others in pretending that this place isn’t terrifying! I’m sure that’s going to work.”

Cheated paused, considering something for a moment, then laughed again. This time, the sound was not quite as harsh, and the other Voices smiled slightly at the sound.



“I’m not even kidding! It will work, because of course it will—nothing in this place makes any sense, so of course the least-sensible path possible is the way forward. That fits perfectly!” Cheated exclaimed again.

For all the sarcasm, Hunted knew the other Voice was being genuine. He smiled, then stood, pulling Cheated up with him.

“Come,” Hunted said. “Let’s go explore our new home, shall we?”

## Chapter End Notes

And finally, we approach the end! Only three chapters left, and you may notice I haven't earned that "Major Character Death" tag yet...

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Notes

Content Warning: Major character death. Suicide and suicidal thoughts.

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

His sobs echoed throughout the ice-cold room, bouncing from wall to wall and growing louder with every reverberation until they were all that he could hear. He was deafened by his own cries of grief and despair, the room reflecting his every negative thought and emotion. It had visibly darkened since his arrival, long shadows growing from the corners and edges until he could not even see his own hands; but when he paused from tearing out his feathers those same hands covered his eyes, so he did not notice how his anguish warped the world around him.

He did notice, however, when the room began to warm. It was slow, at first; almost imperceptibly so. He assumed it was merely a fresh misery, that the room would become so hot his tears would boil from his face before they could fall, that his feathers would burn and his bones scorch, and he fell even deeper into despair.

But then the warming stopped, pausing at a temperature even Broken was forced to admit was comfortable. Hesitantly, he uncovered his eyes and that saw the room was filled with a radiant light, soft and familiar. In the center of the room stood a figure made of many bodies twisting constantly across its surface. The Shifting Mound gazed back at Broken with a depth of feeling he called pity—though others would have named it grief.

This, he thought, was true divinity. She was beyond anything he had ever known. Broken had realized back in the woods that the Princesses he had worshipped and feared had been undeserving of his surrender, but they were mere flickering candles to this goddess's blazing sunlight. He was not even an insect to her.

“Why do you cry, little bird?” she asked, her divine voice driving away the last echoes of Broken's own sobs.

He did not know how to answer her. Why would he not cry? What reason did he have to be anything but miserable? His mind raced for words, but when he opened his mouth, only another broken sob escaped. He crumpled into himself and fell over, his failure to answer such a simple question pulling him back into his drowning despair, that single epithet echoing within his mind. *Failure, failure, failure...*

He flinched when her hand brushed against his neck, then froze, determined to receive whatever punishment she had in mind for him. *Whatever it is*, he thought, *it's no more than what I deserve.*

The violent blows he anticipated never came. Instead, her hand lifted from his back and fell again, moving back and forth along his body. Such a simple act of gentle care was so foreign to Broken that it took him a long minute to recognize what she was doing.

She was petting him. Not like a person would pet an animal, but instead like how one might stroke a loved one; a soft and compassionate touch meant to say ‘You are loved. You are not alone. I am here for you.’

He did not know how much time passed like that. But finally, *finally*, Broken began to relax. Not all at once—his fear and pain left him in great shuddering gasps, his muscles spasming as they loosened for the first time in his life, leaving him wracked with pain both physical and emotional.

And she did not stop or move from his side for a single moment. Her hands found the patches of bare skin where he had ripped out his feathers, traced the many scars that coated his body, brushed away the mud and filth caked to him, and yet they never stopped.

Finally, Broken could speak. Finally, he had words he felt were worth saying to the goddess who graced him with her presence. They crawled from his throat like worms from the soil, but he dared to let them free anyway.

“Why are you so kind to me?”

He did not ask because he imagined her to be cruel; a divine being such as herself would be above the petty maliciousness of mortals. But he could not imagine that such a small and worthless thing such as himself could be worthy of the consideration needed to avoid incidentally crushing him beneath a stray hand, let alone of the attention and kindness he now felt.

She stayed silent for a long moment, though she never stopped petting him. At first, he took her silence to mean that she did not have anything to say to him, that she did not want to talk to such a lowly creature, but eventually she spoke.

“Why would I not? What reason do I have to be cruel?” she finally asked, her voice filled with confusion. It was as if she could not fathom anything less than kindness itself driving her actions.

“But...I’m worthless. Purposeless. I existed only to guide him, and I failed. And now I am alone.” Broken’s words were like a moan, long and drawn out and full of sorrow.

The Shifting Mound continued to stroke his back calmly and gently as she pondered his words. Before she could speak, however, she caught Broken mutter something to himself, so low that even she who made up every piece of the room they now stood in could barely hear.

“I just wish it would all end.”

His head was turned away from her own, so she gently reached one of her hands down and lifted it to meet her gaze. Her grip was light but firm, so even if Broken had wanted to resist the goddess, he would have been unable to. As his head moved, another set of hands moved

to support his back and side, soon joined by yet another, until it was less like he was being turned and more that he was lying on a bed of hands that raised him to meet her. It was soft, and comfortable, and warm.

At first, Broken tried to avert his eyes from the goddess, so as to not taint her radiance with his foul gaze. But her hand continued to gently hold his cheek, and soon his face was drawn towards her. His eyes were pulled along despite his resistance, until they were forced to meet her own.

“You have endured so much, at both the hands of my Vessels and at your own. You walked the path in front of you as far as it went, though it was full of pain, and grief, and sorrow. That does not make you worthless. That does not make you a failure,” she said gently, her eyes full of love. “And you are not alone. You can never be alone, not here.”

“But the others hate me, I know it. They see me as a weight to drag behind them, as nothing but a burden. And I’m sure the Princesses would feel the same if they met me properly,” Broken groaned. He had relaxed so deeply into her cradling arms it seemed like all of his bones had melted away and the cushion of hands he now lay on was the only thing holding his shape together.

“I am certain they love you in their own ways. You do not see how they care for you, how they love you, even for your despair. A burden you may be at times, but one they are all too happy to carry. Does a tree hate the weight of its branches? Does a neck resent that it must carry its head? You are a part of them, just as they are a part of you. They cannot help but love you.”

She paused, allowing her words to sink in before continuing.

“But I do not just mean your fellow shards of the Long Quiet, nor do I refer to my Vessels. This place, while crafted from a piece of the Long Quiet’s form, is me. I am everything you see here. You cannot be alone, for I am every where and every thing.”

For the first time since he crawled into his corner, Broken moved of his own volition. He lifted his head from her palm even though to separate himself from her warm touch was agony, and he looked around the room. Gone were the long shadows, gone were the relentless echoes of his own disparaging voice: all was replaced by her splendor.

He felt the warmth of her presence on every inch of his body. He knew she could see him, all of him, and he wanted to shrink away from her gaze until he realized that she did not hate him as he expected. Her gaze was not one of disgust, but instead compassion and love. She saw and loved all of him. And finally, he realized the truth of her words.

He could almost feel himself growing. What remained of his tattered feathers stood out from where they had been plastered to his body by mud and fear, then settled into a more natural position. In his mind, his worth grew from that of an insect or worm, past pet or priest, and finally settled on that of a *person*. Not an equal to the goddess before him—he was but a fragment of divinity, while she was its whole—but not so far away as to be called a *lesser*.

He turned to look at her, at the Shifting Mound, and saw the radiance he felt all around him reflected in her joyful smile. He could not help but wear a faltering grin of his own.

“Thank you,” he whispered. If her smile could have grown, in that moment he was sure it would have.

“Do you still want it all to end?” she asked.

“No,” Broken began, then shook his head. “No. I don’t want this moment to end. I want it to last eternity, to never fade.” He sighed and continued.

“But that’s not how it works, is it?” he asked.

She shook her head sadly.

“I’m afraid not. Eternity is the Long Quiet’s domain, but you have too much of my change within you. You will not fade, but this moment will.”

Broken nodded, then stood from her bed of hands and faced her. She knew what he was going to say before he even opened his mouth.

“Are you certain?” she asked.

“I am.”

Whether in a day, a year, or a millennium, Broken knew this weightless feeling would fade, and he would drag himself back down into the muck. It was inevitable. He was a fragment of change, yes, but he was born to stasis and stagnation. To make his current state permanent would be to change him into something else entirely—and such a change would shatter him utterly, a true death. He was Broken, and he would always be.

But if he made the decision to leave now, while the joy of personhood still flooded his veins, the choice would be made of his own free will, not born of surrender. It would be one last act of defiance to that pull that tried incessantly to bring him into oblivion. He could never win this battle, but now, in this single moment, he could refuse to lose.

Broken’s gaze was firm; his decision was made, and for once he had the spine to keep it. The Shifting Mound nodded once, then opened her mouth to speak.

“Come in.”

At first, Broken was confused, until the door to the room slowly creaked open and Hero stepped through.

“Sorry, I was walking by, and I couldn’t help but overhear—” he began nervously, but she cut him off with a wave and a forgiving smile.

“I know.”

Hero’s eyes locked on Broken, and he smiled sadly.

“You look different,” Hero began. Broken laughed, once, a mocking thing—but then he smiled back.

“I think it’s time for me to go,” was all he said in reply.

“I know—I, I heard,” Hero stammered. “Are you sure you can’t stay?”

He could tell Broken’s mind was set, but he had to ask. Perhaps there was still some way to save his fellow Voice, to let him hold onto this newfound peace for just a little longer.

Broken thought for a moment, then took a deep breath and allowed all of his doubts to wash away with his exhale. He stood proud, confident in his decision. He wondered if perhaps it was the first right choice that he had ever made.

“I made my peace with death a long time ago,” he began. “From the moment I learned that this was an option, I knew I would wind up here eventually. But I never imagined that it could be anything other than a surrender, than me giving into the anguish.

“But that’s not the case here. For the first time since I can remember, I feel truly whole. I wish I could remain like this forever, but already I feel the doubts gnawing away at my edges, the grief weighing down the corners of my soul. I know one day I will choose to leave, to end; it may as well be now, while I’m still free. Before I fall once more into despair.

“But for once, I’m not running from my present or avoiding an unpleasant future. I’m finally free to realize what I truly want, and I know that I am ready to go. Why hold onto something past it’s time?”

Hero thought for a long moment, considering his fellow Voice’s words.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said. “Maybe if I did more—”

“No,” Broken interjected sharply. “This isn’t on you, or any of the others. I was born from the Long Quiet’s decisions; they made me, *me*. But it’s not his fault either—or anyone’s, really. This is just who I am.

“But *I* am making this decision; I am *choosing* my path, rather than waiting until that choice is stripped from me by my own nature. To make the jump, rather than simply fall. I’m taking control of my life, the only way I can.”

Hero was not entirely sure he understood, but he supposed he did not need to. His fellow Voice, his friend, his brother, was set on his course. He had chosen his own path, after a lifetime of being dragged around by the Long Quiet or the other Voices. Knowing all of that, who was he to say the decision was wrong?

“Are you scared?”

Broken cocked his head to the side thoughtfully, then shook his head.

“No, actually. It feels okay.”

Hero nodded once, then stepped forward and pulled Broken into a hug, squeezing him tight for one precious moment before letting him go. There were far too many words to ever say left between them, but no time to give them the space they deserved. Broken turned to the Shifting Mound, who stretched out her arms as if to embrace him as well. He stepped forward, and she wrapped herself around him.

Her head bent down to his and she turned, whispering something in his ear so quietly that Hero could not hear. Then her many hands began to move across his body once again, pressing down his feathers until it looked like all of his edges were disappearing before Hero's eyes. She was like a potter working a piece of clay, smoothing it out and removing every detail, and with every pass of her arms less and less of Broken was there, until finally nothing was left but air and silence.

A single tear fell down Hero's cheek.

"Thank you." Hero's voice cracked, and he had to take a breath before continuing. "For the first time I've ever known, he seemed...genuinely happy. I'm glad you could help him on his way."

She moved forward, one hand reaching up to cup Hero's cheek, another gently wiping away his tear.

"I will always be here for you. For all of you. For now, I shall leave to tell the Long Quiet of what transpired, and to return this shard to him. Remember, I am never far away, if you ever have any need of me."

Hero nodded, and the Shifting Mound began to sink into the floor, her form dissolving as she fell, until at last she was gone.

Hero took a deep, shuddering breath, and his gaze fell on a small, dark object in the corner. He bent to pick it up.

It was one of Broken's feathers, indistinguishable from any of the other Voices', yet very much his own. Hero smiled sadly as he looked at it. He nestled gently it in the plumage of his chest and left the room.

## Chapter End Notes

I wrote this chapter several months ago, and it made me cry every time I came back to it. I know some people were hoping that the Voices would get some kind of "and they all lived happily ever after," but unfortunately, I don't find that a satisfying conclusion. This is the closest thing I could think of to a good ending for Broken, and I hope I did him justice.

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She winced as he pulled on her hair. No matter how gentle he tried to be—and she knew quite well he was being as tender as possible—the vines were knotted deep in not just her hair, but her very being. Even now she could almost feel them writhing on the table beside her, still trying to find and bind her. She felt something above and behind her give, and the soft pulls on her hair paused as another thorny vine joined the pile.

Thorn could not quite restrain the flinch that pulled her away from his gentle hand as he placed it back on her head. He paused, just letting his hand rest there—waiting. She took a breath and nodded, and he took to unwinding a new vine from her long hair. This pattern had already repeated itself a dozen times already, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not escape her old mistrust completely.

He loved her, she knew—his quiet patience as he waited for her to give permission every time he touched her told her that much, among a hundred other tiny things he did, even in the short time they had been together. And she knew she loved him deeply in return. When the Long Quiet freed her and they kissed for the first time, and when they reunited not long ago, in those moments of pure passion she could forget all her scars and be free of all the doubts.

But in quiet, tender, intimate moments like these, it was so much harder to ignore those nagging fears.

Even so, every second she sat here without a blade being plunged in her back, every time he paused to wait for permission that he already knew he had, her flinches grew a little bit smaller. She hoped her lover noticed, that he saw just how hard she was trying to let those old fears go. She hoped he knew that they were not slights against him.

Of course, Smitten had noticed how her flinches shrank, though the differences were slight. He saw every facet of his beloved; every mark and every detail that could be seen was imprinted in his mind so deeply he would never forget. Sitting here, so close to the woman he treasured, he wanted nothing more than to speak the words in his heart, to loudly proclaim for all to hear just how much he adored her.

But he did not. For just as he saw her recoil at his touch, he saw her do the same at his words. He knew how the Long Quiet had said so many nice things to her, how Opportunist had worked through him to whisper poisoned honey in her ears. He knew that, though his own poetry was genuine, she would not, *could* not see it that way. Though he wanted to be nothing more than bold and loud and earnest, he sat quietly and spoke calmly. For her, he could restrain even the greatest force he knew—his own love.

The door to the room they were in opened quietly, and a familiar face peeked through the crack. The Witch crept into the room slowly, as if by moving inches at a time she could avoid being noticed. Of course, the two other occupants of the room were well aware of her—



Thorn had not lost her sharp Witchy senses, and Smitten had an uncanny sense for when the Princess was nearby. However, neither acknowledged Witch's entry in any way for fear of scaring her off, so they merely kept her in the corner of their eyes as she stalked her way into the room.

Witch gently shut the door behind her and crouched against the wall next to it. She was positioned perfectly so that she could escape the room easily if either of the other two moved but was hidden by the door if anyone else followed her. She sat there, watching Smitten gently preening Thorn's hair until a question finally bubbled its way from between her lips.

"How can you trust her?"

Smitten paused, wondering if he had misheard. He looked up at Witch to see her staring right back at him with the question still burning in her eyes. He considered it for a moment before he shrugged and returned to working on a particularly stubborn vine.

"I love her," he replied simply.

Witch shook her head, though it was not clear if it was because the answer was not what she wanted, or to deny it outright—or perhaps both. The questions came faster now, almost desperate, like they were a lifeline Witch needed for her own survival.

"But how? She's me, isn't she? How can you love her after everything we did to each other? Aren't you scared she'll bite back?"

Smitten paused again, leaving the dreadful vine wedged in his lover's hair for another moment. His hands moved unconsciously as he thought, almost petting the hair of the Princess in front of him, as if he thought losing contact with her for even an instant would cause him to wither and die.

"I wouldn't say I'm scared. The only thing that ever really frightened me was the thought of hurting her—of hurting you." He thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"But I guess you could say I'm frightened of losing her. Of scaring her away. But you mean afraid of her hurting me, don't you?"

At this, Smitten laughed. Truly laughed, for just a second, letting slip the overwhelming joy he felt every instant he was in his lover's presence. He reined himself in shortly, but it was good to let a little of his true feelings out. He could restrain his heart's exultations, yes, but it could not be healthy to do so forever. He had to seek what outlets he could.

"I care not for my own safety. Ask the others, and they'll tell you—I let us burn to death just to spend another second in the presence of that Princess. I helped us flirt with a Vessel made of nothing but razor-sharp blades and the desire to hurt us."

The smile left Smitten's eyes and voice as his face grew dark and thunderously heavy. He could not keep the rage from his voice as he recalled one moment in particular.

"And I drove the blade, still slick with her blood, into our own *treacherous* heart."

In an instant, Smitten was back to his usual self, the joy at the current scenario overwhelming the rage of past hurts.

“In short, no. I’m not afraid of pain or betrayal from her. Or you, for that matter. I suppose I have too much love to care about what happened in the past.”

Smitten thought for a moment, then continued.

“I *was* worried, for a time, that my love may not have been reciprocated. It took me too long to realize that some of the Princesses I adored did not return my affection. Once I did so, I began to doubt the feelings of them all. It was hard to separate the true love from the many lies I had told myself over a thousand lives, and I feared that no Princess had ever loved me in truth.”

At this, Thorn reached a hand back from where she sat and clutched Smitten’s own, intertwining their fingers together and holding him tight. Though she could not see the smile he beamed in response, she could feel its warmth radiating outwards and could not help but wear a gentle one of her own.

“But I know now that some do,” Smitten finished.

Witch was staring back at him, surprise written across her face. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but no sound escaped for several long moments. Before she could put words to the confusion burning in her soul, there was a gentle knock at the door. After a brief pause, it was repeated, but nobody had a chance to answer or give permission to enter before it swung open, and Opportunist stepped inside.

Witch was hidden behind the open door, but Thorn was completely exposed. Her trust and love for Smitten helped control her residual suspicion, but Opportunist had no such leeway—and for good reason. Even Smitten eyed the other Voice with distrust.

Opportunist put up his hands quickly. He wore a slight smirk, the kind of smile most often seen on people who knew more than you, and immediately everyone was even more on edge, despite that clearly being the opposite of his intent.

“Hey, it’s okay, look—no blade, see? I’ve been checking up on the others, making sure everyone’s okay, not killing each other and all. I heard you two talking and I figured I’d take a peek. Apologies if I’m interrupting!”

He spoke quickly and earnestly, but he could not keep a sly undertone from creeping into his voice. Smitten knew his fellow Voice well enough to be sure that he was not being quite honest, and it seemed as though neither Thorn, nor Witch in her hiding spot, had relaxed at all either. Opportunist withered under their suspicious gazes and awkwardly rubbed the back of his head as he laughed to himself.

“That’s fair, I guess. No use trying to pull a fast one on you two, huh? Truth is, I…” he trailed off here, seeming to gather his thoughts. And then he nodded, as if coming to a decision.

“The truth is, I was looking for you, Princess. I wanted to talk to you. It’s probably a good thing he’s here too, I guess—he can tell you I’m not lying, for once.”

Opportunist’s voice was surprisingly sincere. Normally when he spoke, when he was lying or just trying to suck up to someone, he could not keep his dishonesty out of his tone. But here and now, to the surprise of everyone, his words were untainted by malice.

“I won’t apologize for killing you. We’ve both said those words dishonestly too many times for you to ever believe me, and it would be a lie yet again. Even now, with all the power of hindsight, I still think we made the best we could out of a bad situation. But I guess I am sorry for betraying you all those times, afterwards.”

He sighed and took a moment to recollect his thoughts. The others stared in a mixture of shock and curiosity about what he would do next, and Witch listened intently from behind the door.

“I was thinking about you, and about me. And I realized that if it was up to me, we never would have made it up those stairs. Not a single time. We got close once or twice, you know, in the versions of the story that didn’t lead to you.

“But we never could trust each other. I just had to win every time and didn’t see any room for compromise. As far as I was concerned, it was us or you, and neither of us could win if the other was still breathing. That other Princess thought the same thing. If it weren’t for that idiot deciding to trust you and give you the blade, we’d still be there, falling down those stairs and dying together, again and again.

“But it didn’t have to be that way, and I *am* sorry for my part in it.”

Finished, Opportunist turned to leave, his eyes downcast. So lost in his own head, he failed to notice Witch hiding behind the door, although she was visible from where he had stepped further into the room. He reached to pull the door closed and paused.

“You don’t have to worry about seeing me again. I plan to find the other one and tell her the same thing, and then I’m probably taking Her offer. So, I guess this is goodbye. I wish you two the best of luck.”

To everyone’s surprise, it was not Smitten or even Thorn’s voice that called out to stop Opportunist before he could leave. Instead, it was Witch who stood and held fast the door. Opportunist could only stare in shock—and a touch of fear—as she seemingly appeared out of thin air such a short distance away.

Witch only looked back at him, the surprise on her own face mirroring his, as if she could not believe her own actions. Thorn had decided to sit back and watch while Smitten simply returned to untangling vines from her hair, his own limited part in the conversation over.

“You betrayed me,” Witch said hesitantly.

“I did.”

“And I betrayed you.”

“Yes.”

“We’re both nasty little creatures, aren’t we?” she asked with a self-deprecating laugh.

Opportunist did not respond to her question and simply let her collect her scattered thoughts. After a moment, she appeared to come to a decision. She took a deep breath and stood from her habitual crouch, meeting Opportunist eye-to-eye with her head held high.

“Do you think we’ll ever be able to put it all behind us? To let go of the distrust and hate?”

Opportunist thought for a moment, then shrugged and looked at Witch with sadness in his eyes.

“I don’t honestly know. We’ve both hurt each other so many times. Who’s to say we won’t do it again, and just stay trapped in that cycle of violence?”

Witch nodded, but pressed on, determination filling her eyes.

“But we’re both safe now. No basement trapping me or voice in your head forcing you to kill me. There’s nothing else to fear here. There’s just us. I think—” she hesitated then, her resolve faltering for just a moment. She glanced over at Smitten and Thorn, sitting contentedly together. She watched as Thorn failed to restrain yet another miniscule flinch, as Smitten waited for permission he knew would come, and as they sat together and tried to be better than they used to be.

“I think I’d like to try.”

Witch let loose the breath she had been holding, like she thought that if she paused to breathe, she would not be able to finish her thought. She looked Opportunist in the eyes and waited for his response.

For just a moment, the old malice crept back into Opportunist’s heart. He realized this would be a perfect opportunity to get close to his old enemy, and that she must be having the same thoughts. Of course, if he wanted to survive, he would have to get closer to her and betray her first, and—he forced those thoughts down, along with the sly grin currently trying to inch up his face. He looked into her eyes and saw his same hatred mirrored back at him—not hatred for the other, but hatred for themselves.

Buried deep in her soul, past the loathing and fear and doubt and distrust, he could see a tiny smoldering ember of hope. Once extinguished, but recently rekindled. And in his own heart he felt a mirror to that dim and flickering light. A hope to be better than what they were now.

Was that not all he had ever wanted? To be better, by any means necessary? There was not much of a hierarchy to climb anymore, but that just meant the only threat to him was himself. His own suspicion and fear and self-hatred. Sometimes, “any means necessary” did not have to mean violence and betrayal. Sometimes, it could be forgiving an old foe and forgetting the hatred that drove them into the muck together.

And here his former enemy was offering a hand. To climb the stairs to freedom, together. But this time, he felt things would be different.

At least now, the stairs were not literal.

“I think I’d like that too,” he finally replied. “It’s got to be better than dying at least!” Opportunist laughed, shaking his head with chagrin.

“Then I guess you could say I just saved your life,” Witch teased.

“Ha! I guess you did. Well, we should leave these two lovebirds to their... whatever it is they’re doing. After you,” smirked Opportunist as he slid out of the doorway, bowing slightly as if he were a true gentleman.

Witch’s hackles rose and her tail puffed as she crouched slightly, as if the mere suggestion of Opportunist standing behind her was itself a betrayal. But then she stood, grabbed her tail and forcibly smoothed it down. Head held high, she picked up the edges of her dress and walked through the door like the proper Princess she was not. Opportunist followed a respectful distance behind and gently closed the door.

There was silence in the room as Thorn stared at the door, as if she wanted to see through to the other side, to keep watching the pair on their journey together. Smitten’s one-track mind kept him focused on pulling vines from her hair, as more seemed to appear whenever he looked away. Thorn did not bother to tell him that that was precisely the case—she enjoyed his preening.

“Do you think they can do it?” she asked. Smitten did not even pause in his preening of her hair, and as the silence grew between them, she began to wonder if he had even heard her.

“I don’t know,” he replied eventually. “I’d like to think so, at least, but they’ll have to overcome their own natures to succeed. I just don’t know.”

Thorn thought for a moment, then smiled happily as she realized something. She leaned her head straight back and looked Smitten in the eyes as she spoke.

“Well, through love, aren’t all things possible? Even a little self-love might do the trick, with those two.”

Smitten’s eyes lit up at this.

“How very true, my dear,” he replied as he leaned forward until he could stare into her eyes. They both saw their own adoration mirrored, and no more words needed to be spoken as their lips met.

One last thought flickered through Smitten’s mind before he became fully enraptured by the love of the woman before him. It was a thought which added itself to the warm comfort he was already enveloped in: the thought that now, finally, things would be okay.

## Chapter End Notes

And so ends the the penultimate chapter! My goal is to post the last one on December 23, which is the one-year anniversary of when I officially began Epilogue of the Voices!

As always, feel free to leave a comment with your thoughts! I hope you enjoyed!

# Chapter 18: Epilogue

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hero took one last walk around the rooms of his home.

His hand traced the table where Opportunist, Witch, Cheated, and Paranoid had played some card game they created. The small tokens they had gambled with sat untouched since their last game, still stacked into a single huge pile from when Opportunist had won it all. Hero had offered to act as judge when he first heard them shouting accusations of cheating at each other, but Witch said something about cheating without getting caught being the *real* game. Even Paranoid looked like he was having fun throwing accusations around, so he let them be.

He passed by the rulebook that Skeptic and Prisoner had made for their own game, its pages dusty from disuse. Those two did not need to write down the rules; they were memorized from the moment they were first conceived. The pair only recorded them when the others had expressed interest in learning. That interest quickly faded when they saw just how many pages the book had, and it vanished entirely when Prisoner said something about still needing to write the appendices.

Eventually, the pair knew each other so well they could predict the entire conclusion of a match from the very first move. They would sit in silence for hours in quiet contemplation before one would move a single piece just a little to the side, and then they would reset the board.

Hero passed the room where Stubborn and Adversary had fought. Occasionally the others would bet on who would land the next killing blow first, but that usually ended with Witch or Opportunist sneaking away with the box of betting tokens, so it had been a long time since they played that particular game.

He passed yet another room, empty but for a large nest made of thorny vines and piles of downy feathers. That was where Smitten and Thorn had passed the days, rarely leaving each other's embrace. Theirs was one of the few rooms safe from Contrarian's frequent pranks—although Opportunist occasionally tried to goad him into disturbing the pair—as even the mischievous Voice did not want to interrupt the happy couple. Occasionally, Smitten would leave to read his poetry, and Thorn would sit and watch, but that was a rare and treasured event.

Hero never found Hunted's hiding place. None of the Voices had, although none of them looked for it very hard. They did not see the skittish Voice much, and long stretches passed where they wondered if he had simply left without a word. Then he would reappear for a while to chat or keep someone company during a long trek through the otherwise empty hallways at the edges of the basement, before vanishing once more.

Eventually, having decided the others were truly safe and with no more reason to linger, Hunted went on one last walk with each of the other Voices to say goodbye before

disappearing for good.

Each of the other Voices had allowed the Shifting Mound to take them one by one, and the Vessels had rejoined her as well. Cold had been the second to leave, just after Broken, but it took a long time for anyone to realize he was gone. He had spent most of his time wandering at the edges of their home, trying to find something new to slake his endless ennui, so it was not unusual for him to disappear for a while. They did not know for certain that the stoic Voice was gone until Skeptic directly asked the Shifting Mound during one of her visits. He had not told them he was leaving, but that did not surprise anyone—Cold was not the type for long or emotional goodbyes.

Aside from Hero, Smitten and Stubborn had held off the longest, though eventually even they succumbed to the endless pull to rejoin the Long Quiet.

It took eons for Stubborn and Adversary to grow tired of their eternal battle, though the end came as it does for all things in time. It did not end with despair, however; Stubborn would have been content to spend eternity battling his Adversary, and she felt the same. But the Voice decided that he did not wish to exist forever alone with her without his fellows—that solitude and longing for his missing brothers would make him a poor match for her. And Adversary knew that the Shifting Mound could never be truly complete so long as she was missing, and without her battle-companion, she had no more reason to linger.

They concluded with one last competition: a simple race. They each ran to their endings, with the Shifting Mound as the judge, and it was the most violent race in the history of the sport. Each of them tried to be the first to leave, desperate to not have to exist for even a moment without the other. They both tripped and tackled each other nearly a dozen times throughout, and the last stretch turned into a crawl as they were both too exhausted to stand but too proud to surrender.

In the end, the Shifting Mound declared it a tie, and they left together, Adversary rejoining the goddess even as she wiped Stubborn away. Hero would have called it sad, but they left with such wide smiles on their faces he was simply unable to deny their joy. All adventures had to end, he supposed. Smitten was certain that the passionate kiss they had shared in their last moments helped dull any sorrow they may have otherwise felt.

For his part, the lovestruck Voice appeared to ignore the pull towards the Long Quiet better than any of the other Voices, and it seemed like he could have lived in his blissful eternity with Thorn forever. But one day the pair emerged from their little nook so Smitten could read his poetry, and it was impossible to miss the tears that welled in his eyes when he realized that only Hero was there to attend. Even so, Smitten would probably never have suggested leaving on his own, content even with a lonely eternity with his lover, his adoration for Thorn driving him to stay just as firmly as he was pulled away. Instead, it was she who reminded him that she would need to return to the Shifting Mound eventually, or the goddess would never be truly complete. Smitten did not hesitate to declare that he would follow her, and they held hands until the very end.

Now, it was Hero's turn. He was the first of the Voices to appear to guide the Long Quiet, and now he was the last to return to him. It only felt appropriate to stay for his brothers until they had all reached their own conclusions, to make sure that they would never be alone.



He was not sad, to his own surprise. It was his time to go, and he was ready for it. He stepped into the Shifting Mound's embrace, and for quite possibly the first time in his long existence, he felt like he was truly *right*. The hollow feeling that once lingered at the edge of his soul was finally gone.

As warmth filled his body, she leaned in, and he finally heard the words he had seen being whispered into the ears of every Voice before him. The last words he would ever hear. He had always wondered what she said, but somehow, it had never felt appropriate to ask.

Hundreds, thousands of Princesses whispered in unison, so quiet that he could barely hear, each voice overlapping to form the only words that ever really mattered:

"I love you."

## Chapter End Notes

And thus ends the Epilogue.

When I started this story exactly a year ago, I was not expecting any of this. I didn't expect my silly little idea to take a full year to complete, I didn't expect to publish it, and I did *not* expect it to become one of the most popular fics in the Slay The Princess fandom (or at least on Ao3). None of it would be possible without you readers, so thank you for following me and the Voices on this journey.

I must give special thanks to three people: ASpooky, Donjusticia, and Lorcus, who read the early drafts of each chapter and gave me much-needed feedback and support. All three of them have their own fics on this site, and I suggest you check them out--they are pretty fantastic!

While this was my first ever fanfiction, I'm hoping it will not be the last. I have several other projects in the works, one of which I've already started. Stay tuned, and thank you again for reading!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!