

BROKEN BONES

A work by tontodechoque.

Chapter 1: Encounter



1

Year 1, January 1st:

First day as a knight. The welcome process has been a success. I've almost memorized the tower's structure. My superiors claim they see great potential, but I know they say that to everybody. Partners seem friendly, for now. Want to learn.

Year 1, January 2nd:

All in order.

Year 1, January 3rd:

Idem.

Year 1, January 4th:

Idem.

Year 2, July 26th:

(Blank entry.)

Year 3, October 18th:

Idem.

Year 5, June 29th:

Idem.

Year 7, February 5th:

An intruder has entered the tower from the valley. No contraband, wielding a sword. He seemed disoriented and scared, so I instructed him on how to leave the forest without meeting his demise. He took some supplies and headed into the woods.

Year 7, February 6th:

All in order.

Monotony.

If there was a word that described that agonizing feeling which characterized every living second of their adult life, it would be that. Monotony.

Ever since they got promoted as headmaster, responsibility and stress grasped each other's hands and took part in the magical dance of despair. The only thing keeping them from dying of boredom was the Rouge incident, but that was five years ago. The memory of that controversy was perfect to distract them from monotony. That damned monotony.

The same steps, the same words day by day, the same faces, the same streets, the same food, the same uniform, the same formalities. It almost felt like they had been cursed to live through the same day over and over again. It was madness.

It's not like they hated their job, or their students; they just needed a break. They needed to escape. Even if only for a day, they had to get away from the void they called routine if they valued their sanity. They needed a change, something that reminded them they were still alive. Something that proved to them that their heart was still beating.

They needed a challenge.

It just so happened that it was possible for them to compensate for overtime work with vacation days, if the amount exceeded 24 hours; and it just so happened, too, that they had been saving up enough days to redeem a whole month off. It also just so happened that they had communicated they were going on vacation starting mid-april; and it just so happened that their birthday was in that month as well. What a coincidence!

That day, however, they had to endure. May still hadn't come then, yet they could almost taste the freedom that desired month would bestow upon them. Two weeks remained until then, and they decided it was the perfect time to tell their inferiors and students their tasks while they were out. They were going to miss them, in a way.

All the paperwork that permitted them to redeem their esteemed days off was sickening, so to rest their head they opted to plan their activities all throughout the month. They didn't plan on staying home every day, obviously. Staying away from the battlefield for so long had them starved for action.

They decided to find the nearest Solulde map at the academy's library and check which places they hadn't visited yet. The quest, however, was in vain, as they had already been in the most emblematic and eye-catching places. Their excursions,

therefore, shall seek the deepest of Galterea's whereabouts if they wanted the satisfaction of a brand-new odyssey.

While they searched for maps of other regions, they remembered a specific anecdote they heard multiple times through the halls of the academy. It was believed that, in some place on the western border of the Astra forest lay a hunted, wretched tower that acted as the pathway between the world of the living and of the dead. That last part must've been hyperbole, they thought. Still, there was no harm in searching for it, and if at the end of the day the legendary tower didn't exist, they would've entertained themselves in the forest anyway. They had already made up their mind: that tower would be their first destination.

To Vermillion, their plan guaranteed a good time.

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Year 7, May 10th:

Idem.

Year 7, May 11th:

Idem.

Year 7, May 12th:

A bearded vulture has entered. I will not allow it to make the tower their nest.

After many tiresome days, they finally managed to cross to the other side of the forest. It was partly their fault; they did in fact want to challenge themselves by leaving their ax at home; yet the only thing that they accomplished is slowing their pace down. Many would feel honored to always have a weapon and bring it anywhere for whatever may happen; Vermillion was not that kind of person.

Still, the worst was over, they thought; if they were lucky, that tower may have some inhabitants, and in turn food. They could only hope that those people were generous enough to feed someone who'd been starving for days.

Their next objective, therefore, was to find the damn thing. According to what they heard, the tower should be right after Astra forest, yet they weren't able to see it. They quickly put aside their leg cramps to proceed with their journey throughout the border; that would be a problem for another time.

This leisurely walk was enough to make them accept the fact that they were finally away from the academy they've devoted themselves to for the past years. Comforting fresh air made its way into their lungs: addicting; poisoning, almost. The sensation felt illegal, as if they weren't abiding academy protocol and were to be reprimanded for it; those rules made their way into their daily life day by day without them knowing.

Sometimes they were perplexed by how much they changed ever since they got hired. The amount of self-control they had obtained was exorbitant to their insatiable nature. Their personality has noticeably changed, they almost felt proud of how much they accomplished with words and not with fists. Yet, deep inside, they knew it was all a fluke. A disguise used to survive in a world where their way of living was deemed inadequate. Over there, however, they could be whoever they wanted to be unapologetically; nature wasn't one to judge. Just in that instant, they were the most normal person in the world.

Oh, how they missed this feeling.

Their stroll came to a stop when a tall, far away shadow caught their eye, then redirected their path towards it. After a few steps, they found it.

Firewall Tower. The place separating the flames of the dead from the calm of the alive. The building they so wished to investigate, the building their instinct ached for. An incredibly vertical, splendid architectonic marvel; it was said that its length continued underground, reaching the underworld and going beyond the darkness.

Without question, they reached the entrance in a hurry and headed inside.

One of the first things they noticed was how dark it was compared to the outside; Vermillion squinted hard so their eyes could get used to the change in brightness.

Once that was dealt with, it was clear that many unlit torches were hung in the walls. They took one for themselves, in case they were to find some fire.

"Hello?"

Reverb made their voice get more distorted than their helmet already did. Time passed, yet the only reply to their greetings was their own voice bouncing off the walls.

Their left hand rested on the wall to follow the structure of the room, hopefully without tripping over anything; the other hand held the torch high as an improvised mace. The more steps they took, the less they could see; they had no choice but to stay alert.

They came to a halt when their feet stumbled upon the first step of a staircase. A spiral staircase, at that, which inherently made them disadvantageous if any hostiles were to draw near. Despite the danger, they decided to go forth, careful not to trip and fall.

A faint glow that originated from the upper floor made its way into the staircase; an equally faint hope of finding a light source to light up the torch with sprouted from within their heart. Yet, the more steps they took, the more they realized that light was not, in fact, that of which they had expected. Instead of resembling the warmth of a campfire or a lit lantern, it was similar to the cold reflection of seawater in the top of a cave.

Once their fingers felt the wall cease to exist, they pushed aside that contradiction and stepped forward to the second floor. Moonlight crept from the windows at the left of the now lit main hallway. The passage of time could explain the coldness of the glow; after all, it was late noon when they left the woods. The satellite decided to show mercy in their tired eyes and bless their sight with the slightest amount of light.

Despite the low amount of light, it was enough to distinguish unexplored doors in the right wall. There were also no torches to be seen in their corresponding hooks.

They quickly brushed it off and made their way to the first door. Locked. The second and third door were no dice either, but the latch on the fourth one came undone by their touch alone. Just for a moment, they swore to have caught a figure in the corner of their eye, yet when they turned around to see, the door at the end of the hallway stared back at them.

However, there was no time to waste, and they made their way inside. The door's screech welcomed them into what seemed like a guest room, awaiting in excellent condition its next guest. Tranquility irradiated from the chamber; it was certainly a great place to rest. Despite this, Vermillion was more fixated on the fire of the chimney, and hurried over to light up the torch. Finally having a stable light source at any time wherever they went made them instantly relieved, yet they couldn't

ignore a single detail. When they found the tower for the first time, there was no smoke coming from the top; in fact, there was no chimney to be seen outside. The latter could be easily solved: it could've simply had an air vent that connected this room, and the rest of the rooms if they also had chimneys, with a trapdoor or similar structure at the top of the tower to let the smoke exit. The former, however, only had one solution: there was someone else at the tower.

Once they realized this, they instantly checked every nook and cranny of the room to find anything that would help them survive. Having inspected everything, and not finding a single thing, they turned around to face the door and peeked outside. Both sides of the hall were empty, so they headed out and into the large door at the end of the hallway. Going through it revealed a much larger, surprisingly higher quality hallway. Curtains and knight's armors complemented each pillar of the passage. Walls were filled with paintings and stained-glass windows depicting war scenes or authoritarian idols throughout the years.

Among all of the paintings, one struck out to them the most: it depicted a series of knights unsheathing their swords in unison. None of them wore their helmets, revealing that all of them were part of a subspecies that developed horns. In actuality, what had really caught their attention was a specific knight, who, in contrast with his colleagues, didn't have any. No, that wasn't it; he *did* have them, it was just that they were filed down. Something about seeing someone like that being granted the status of knighthood filled Vermillion's heart with a sense of familiarity. It made them feel... accomplished? proud? They couldn't quite pinpoint the exact feeling, but it was refreshing to see someone like that in such a place, and that it was documented in such notorious media as art. They glanced at the plaque of the frame shortly after.

'To the knights who gave up their lives to protect Firewall Tower.'

They let the melancholy pass right through them as they walked down the hallway, inspecting the rest of the decoration careful enough not to burn it with the torch. At the end, there was an identical door to the one they just came from, so they decided to go through as well. The next room was something they did not expect.

The first floor lobby. Or, at least, a room that was meant to mimic it. Confusion filled their thoughts as they went towards the entrance to check if it was actually a balcony of some kind. But alas, it wasn't; this was certainly the first floor.

Vermillion didn't understand. It was impossible to get down from the second floor without going through some stairs. Plus, the entrance to the second floor was a spiral staircase, not a door that connected both floors inexplicably. Nothing about that place made any sense, and, at the same time, that made them more eager to find out what was really happening. Along with their contradictory feelings, they turned around to the interior of the tower and, to their surprise, the door to the other

side of the lobby changed again. In its place was a staircase that led to the basement. How nice.

They could almost feel the tower itself laughing at them, but it didn't matter. That little sadomasochism session would be over soon; they were sure of it. They followed the new pathway until they found what looked like an armory. Just like the last hallway, it was filled to the brim with armors, but these were less ornamental and seemed sturdier, heavier and more dangerous. There were also a series of tables with utensils to sharpen and create weaponry, but the furnaces used to mend metal weren't in use. The walls were decorated with different types of weapons: swords, axes, daggers, spears, bows and arrows, spikey balls... the list was endless. The armory called to them, as the moonlight gave it an ethereal glow to its metal. They could borrow one, surely no one would notice, they thought.

Before they could grab a weapon to defend themselves, the sound of a door getting slammed shut caught Vermillion off-guard.

"Who goes there?!" they warned, facing the origin of the noise.

There was no one there, just the entrance of another room right beside the corner of the armory. That tower was driving them insane. They took one of the daggers with them just to be sure, but since their skirt didn't have any pockets, they opted to store it in their boot so they could still have a free hand. Prepared for the worst, they gently opened the door.

They expected to have cornered whoever closed the door, but it seemed as though they had escaped, because there was no one else in the small chamber. In fact, they were the second most notorious thing in the room, the first being the lonely chair that lay in the middle of it. Contrary to regular chairs, this one had some sort of belts around its armrests and two front legs. The dried up bloodstains and the huge collection of weapons laying beside the chair made apparent the purpose of such claustrophobic room. Vermillion's heart skipped a beat the moment they spotted the ashes and remains in the corner of the chamber.

A shiver went down their spine trying to imagine the number of people who fell victims to the room's cruelty. Truly, those types of inhumane traditions should've already been buried by the past.

It was when they noticed the same blue shimmer through the door when Vermillion snapped out of their trance. They tried to follow it and ended up in the armory once again, no trace of the light. That, however, did not mean the room didn't change: where once stood a full set of armor, there now was a hole in the ground, with a rope tied to the wall above it. Their head was about to explode, not a single thing that had happened in that damned tower made any sense. Moved by inertia, they threw common sense out the window before they could ponder why that hole had appeared, and instead went through it with the help of the rope, trying not to burn it.

They weren't surprised when they wound up in the first floor lobby again. Clearly, the tower had some kind of secret mechanism that invited them to explore, and at the same time punished them for it. It was almost as if it had a mind of its own and it wanted them to get away from it. What they didn't expect, though, was a single paper sheet hung where the torch once was. They stepped closer to the note and started reading the cursive lettering:

'Dearest visitor,

it is our wish and hope that thou possess the gift of literacy, lest this message's mission be for naught.

It is not our intention to cause thee any feeling of unease, yet we fear thou art, in this very moment, invading private property. But of course, we understand Firewall Tower's immense richness as part of the cultural Galtérea scene — it is only natural for the most interested in the matter to wish to explore its innards. That being said, this circumstance does not give thee the right to enter without previous notification, and much less to commit an act of thievery.

We kindly invite thee to discuss thy next excursion to the site, as well as the restitution of the subtracted weapon, over a wonderful cup of tea, in any of the marvelous establishments of the valley. However, should thou show the slightest indication of acting against the will of those who once made the Tower their home, it would be wise for thee to leave the premises posthaste.

Our most cordial regards,

-Sir Verdi Spinto, Representative of Firewall Tower's Knight Unit.'

Fuck that.

Vermillion hadn't gone through the horrors of the forest just to come back empty-handed. The audacity of the note made their blood boil, to the point of almost ripping it apart and incinerating it.

Therefore, they decided to ignore it and proceeded to the interior of the tower once more. As they came to expect, the entrance to the next room changed once again, this time it became a single archway that redirected towards a long, dark hallway. The sound of boot crushing paper alerted them once more. Another note; this one, way shorter:

'We recommend thou obey. Turn back before thou regret it.'

The tower protector's threats fell on deaf ears; Vermillion was already determined to keep going forward. They discarded the paper and entered deeper into the heart of the beast. Papers filled the walls as they moved forward, several messages along the lines of 'get away', 'thou shall not be here' and 'get out' started piling up, each in worse calligraphy than the last. The severity of the notes was high, to the point

where they covered up the entire hallway like an unrecognizable cocoon, from head to toe. Upon seeing this, a little pyromaniac was born in the bottom of their heart. The paper amalgamation came to a stop once they had reached what it seemed like a wall; upon closer inspection, though, a pair of doorknobs unmasked the true nature of that which lay hidden behind the pages. Without further delay, they entered the next room.

A high ceiling decorated with arches and domes greeted them, a pleasant juxtaposition to the narrow chambers they had found up until then. The image gave them a kind of peace they didn't quite know how to explain; they couldn't begin to comprehend, rather, how a place of such magnitude could even fit in that tower.

They had just entered a damn cathedral.

Observing the edifice from the narthex gave them an idea of its altitude, they then walked straight to the crossing so they had a better view. Stained glass windows and figures adorned the chapels further away, giving the place the faintest of colors. Their steps echoed loudly, they were their only companions, after all. A baptismal font could be seen beside the altar, but they ignored it, more fixated on the object exposed on the latter. A strange item, not traditional to cathedrals in any way: a crystal ball. Jackpot.

Before they were able to grab it, a musical chord made them jump in place. Vermillion didn't take long to figure out where the melody came from, as it danced around the holy place. A huge and imposing organ lay in the triforium above the entrance, the biggest stained-glass window in the cathedral behind it. From where they stood, they had no way of discerning the virtuoso that engulfed the room in an ethereal aura, if they even existed. Then again, there could've always been a possibility of a complex automation system playing the keys without human intervention, making them truly alone in the chamber.

Their fear got the better of them; they flexed their knee as to slide their hand into their boot and equip the dagger. In half a second, they used to take it out, they had already formed a plan: take the ball with their arm and leave before whoever was on the upper floor could lay a finger on them. When they turned around to face the altar, the music stopped.

"You!"

The accusatory finger of the floating armor was enough for them to enter a defensive state. It appeared to have been a knight; his face and body covered in a white tunic. Horned skulls adorned his right pauldron and hood, Vermillion thought of this as trophies of his past victims, and that they would be next. The entity drew near them before they could react.

"What is it that you seek? For what purpose did you come to these lands?!"

"Well, it was either this or the Pikudos, so..."

"You fool!" Vermillion's apparent calm collapsed the moment they heard the specter yell. "Do you have some sort of brain damage that prohibits you from obeying orders or are you just plain stupid?!"

"I mean, to be fair--"

"Save your breath! Your choice is made. As the supreme representative of the Knight Unit, it is my command to make you pay the toll. And pay you shall, with your life!"

The apparition rushed towards Vermillion and grappled with them. They tried to attack him with their dagger to no avail, as it passed right through his body.

Floor tiles came off of the crossing and flew straight towards them, Vermillion almost didn't make it. In just a second, the edifice's structure had become hostile and created bars with its walls and crossbeams in order to trap them. Thanks to their trained reaction time, Vermillion was able to escape the ambushes the stone mender prepared for them.

Vermillion lost sight of the entity and prepared themselves for whichever attack it had planned. Considering how useless the dagger had been, they had to act fast if they didn't want to give up their life. The pillars didn't take long to contort towards them, and just behind those same pillars came the armored ghost. However, just before the impact, Vermillion had a sudden realization. Up until then, it had been attacking them face on. It shouldn't have any problem changing the angle of his attack to win, being a metaphysical entity and all, so why didn't he? The answer was simple.

"Stand back!" the way they shook their torch into his direction was enough for the knight to let out a piercing shriek. The walls of the cathedral, along with their master, backed off with no further delay.

An insurmountable fear of fire. That was it, that explained everything. Why all the torches were either unlit or missing, the ashes in the torture room, why the entity took so long to make its triumphal entrance, it was all connected. The dagger didn't matter anymore; they finally had a proper weapon to defend themselves.

"Yeah, that's right! Let the light of God be your salvation!!"

Wrath blinded the ghost as they used the infrastructure to create a web of debris that divided the cathedral between the crossing and the altar, forbidding them from reaching the crystal ball. Still, prior to its completion, Vermillion went deep into the barricade to get to the other side before the pillars, walls and religious paraphernalia engulfed them.

They were faster than the innards of the cathedral and managed to reach the altar, where their prize rested. They didn't take long to pick up the surprisingly light crystal ball. In fact, they were actually planning on keeping it between their arm

and torso, but just before they could do that, a vision was shown within it: the path the ghost was planning to take to attack them again. The knight was taken by surprise when they managed to foresee their location and point the torch right at him; some unstable debris falling onto him from the scare.

"How did you...?!"

"I had a little bit of help." they shook the ball lightly so as to not break it.

"Outrageous!! How dare you mock us like this?! Can you even begin to understand what you're saying, the weight of your words?! You shall meet your demise!"

He repeated the ambush several times, and all of them were interrupted by Vermillion's semi-clairvoyance. It came to a point where it wielded so many ruins that, when it lost control of them because of the fire, they fell on top of it, burying it and declaring its opponent as the winner.

Once they were done celebrating the victory, they discarded the dagger in favor of the crystal ball. They dropped in front of the ghost, who had seemingly fainted.

"Here, you can keep it."

And with that, they turned around and headed for the cathedral's exit. Vermillion did not expect him to reply, yet a weak voice echoed through the place.

"Is it true?"

"Huh?"

"Can you really see inside the crystal ball?" the sudden tenderness in his words caught Vermillion off-guard.

"Sure, I mean... that's what it's for, right?"

After those words, the both of them looked at each other. The intensity of the event kept them both stuck in place for what seemed like hours.

"How interesting." is all he said after the pause.

The apparition left with the same speed he used to destroy the heart of the cathedral, going through the ruins as if nothing had happened.

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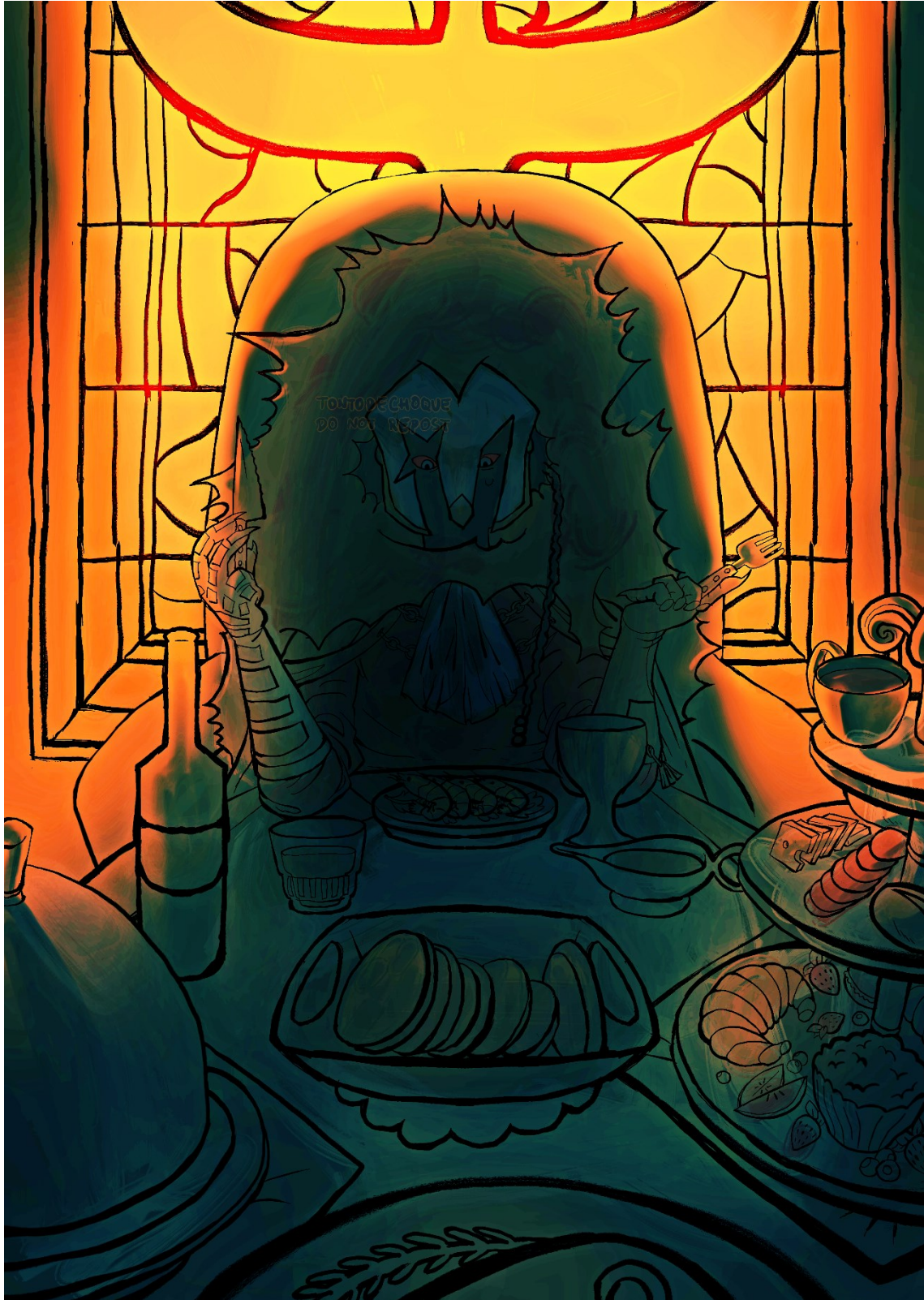
Year 7, May 12th:

~~A bearded vulture has entered. I will not allow it to make the tower their nest.~~

Change of plans.

Chapter 2: Ouroboros

This chapter contains scenes mentioning eating disorders and alcoholic substance abuse, as well as ableist behaviors.



"I'm sorry, but does your name have any fancy pronunciation? Let's see, maybe 'Dou-ché'? 'Duh...'?"

"Hehe, just 'Dutchess' is fine."

"Dutchess, okay."

The interaction was enough to break the tension in the headmaster's office. They had arranged their work hours so that their students could meet with them at a very specific time of day to discuss any aspect of the subject they imparted. Only one person ever came: Dutchess.

She was one of their students, of the very few who wasn't scared of Vermillion's presence. It was a real feat considering how menacing they could be, especially during exam season. Though they didn't only haunt the classrooms - many were the times when they stayed outside during recess to watch over kids and prevent fights, giving detention time to those who severely wanted to hurt other kids.

No wonder she was the only one who came.

"So, what's on your mind?"

"Alright, so, is there any book I could read about the subject?"

"The one I recommended to you at the beginning of the semester."

"No, no, it's not that. I know that's the book that has the curriculum, but I can't, um, understand it."

"You have trouble remembering it?"

"Yeah... I've tried everything, I've read it several times, but I can't understand anything. My friends have tried to explain it their way, but that doesn't work either."

"That's odd, I thought you liked my class, given the fact that you don't take your eyes off the lecture."

"Yeah, well... I'm so focused on it because I can't really afford to miss out any small bit of the curriculum."

"Hmm... does this also happen with other subjects?"

"Yes. Usually, I tend to memorize everything I can, but most times that's not enough to pass because, even if I memorize it, I still can't understand it."

"And you waited to tell me right in the middle of the semester?" Vermillion leaned back in their chair.

"Um, I mean... I wanted to... try if I could manage it on my own... I didn't wanna be... bothersome..." Her voice was barely audible when she finished her sentence.

The kid was one of the very few who bothered to pay attention when Vermillion spoke. She couldn't keep up, however - still, she was genuinely interested in the subject and wanted to give it her all, despite her grades not showing the sacrifices she had to make to pass.

If the most hard-working student was having trouble understanding the subject, they didn't want to imagine the position the students that were afraid of them were in.

Vermillion sighed.

"I'm afraid I have no other choice. I'm giving you homework."

"Huh?"

"During the week you will make a list of everything you don't understand, and every Friday after you finish your classes you will come here, and neither of us will leave until you understand everything."

"Whaaaa?! Thank you so much!!" Her face of relief was more than enough for Vermillion.

"It's just my job. Ah, by the way, if you can, tell your parents or the school counselor about your issues. Trust me." They advised as they accompanied Dutchess towards the office door.

"I will! Thank you!!"

"No problem, goodbye Dutchess." Having heard those words, she left through the corridor the same way she entered their office: with her broom. She once again left the headmaster on their own.

Vermillion grabbed the door handle.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE MONK.

THE RIGHTEOUS.

THE FORTUNATE.

THE DAMNED.

CANNON FODDER.

THE VULTURE.

The action in the whereabouts of the azure prison.

FIRST SCENE

Nighttime. Cold bedchamber bathed in moonlight. Graffito, stained glass windows, flags all throughout the walls. Conversation between four unfortunate souls after the actions of CANNON FODDER: THE RIGHTEOUS, a prideful noble; THE FORTUNATE, child of luck; THE DAMNED, currently dormant; and THE MONK, who closes the bedroom's door, trapping them inside.

THE RIGHTEOUS: So unceremonious! How crude, what a display of ability!

THE MONK: A flawless play by none other than the star knight. I must say, being witness to such spectacle hath truly been an honor.

THE FORTUNATE: Save your acrimony for the enemy, monk. Let us be thankful that the Tower is still standing.

THE RIGHTEOUS: So what if it is? It's not take long to fall if we do not intervene.

THE FORTUNATE: I beg of you, be my guest and help the cause, why don't ya?

THE MONK: Thy enthusiasm is appreciated, friend. Nevertheless, there is nothing we can do in our current position.

THE FORTUNATE: Well, what about the ball?

THE RIGHTEOUS: What about it?

THE FORTUNATE: Don't tell me you didn't notice!

THE MONK: Prithee, rid him of thy judgement. For his lack of perception is the only one at fault.

THE RIGHTEOUS: Argh! Whatever! As if such trinket was of any importance! Let them take ten of them if they so wish!

THE FORTUNATE: No way, we cannot afford all that!

THE MONK: While their stealing of the orb may be worrisome, if that may be the risk we must face in order to protect the integrity of the sanctuary, I am certain they'll understand our apathy.

THE VOICE OF THE DAMNED: You're wrong.

THE DAMNED's eyes open wide. The three commentators concentrate their attention towards THE DAMNED, who is succumbed in shadow. Approaching THE FORTUNATE and THE RIGHTEOUS, a speech was given.

THE DAMNED: I can understand you two useless morons not being able to get it by now. But you? Really? I expected more of you, monk.

THE FORTUNATE: Sweet mother of Christ!

THE DAMNED: Silence, brat! Now listen all and listen well, this situation could be advantageous, you see. Our guest's attack predictions hint at their real identity. Do I need to remind you the prerequisites one must have in order to use such instrument? This person is too precious to let go. This could change everything.

THE MONK: But, that would mean...

THE RIGHTEOUS: And why would we listen to you? There's no reason to risk our position!

THE FORTUNATE: Yeah, that's right!

THE DAMNED: Gentlemen, please, do not lie to yourselves. I've seen how you prayed for this very day to come. Not only to enjoy it for yourselves, but to share this freedom with the rest, and rid ourselves of the chains that lock us in this prison called destiny. Now's our chance to truly be liberated, are we really going to waste it?

THE MONK: I...

THE FORTUNATE: Hey! No way, don't you dare!

THE RIGHTEOUS: Monk, you're seriously not considering taking this old-timer seriously, right?

THE MONK: ...We shall communicate this decision posthaste.

Vermillion closed the door.

The rumbling noise of the ghost's words against the walls of their head had come to a halt as they hid the orb in their hair and exited the cathedral. It would've been pointless to decipher its motives, ponder why it let them roam around freely with one of its treasures. That's why they decided that they should better be safe than sorry and leave - a part of them didn't want to think about how long it would take them to do so, taking into account how nonsensical the rooms and their connections to one another could be.

Just as they swore not to entertain themselves in random rooms, they realized what part of the Tower they had wound up in.

A large, vertical library lay before them, hundreds of books like treasure at the disposal of those pirates who dared find them. A narrow ocean of aisles, not enough of them for a cabin boy to get lost at sea, but with high walls that could be easily mistaken as waves - it was high enough so that the ceiling wasn't visible. However, a single ladder was laid beside the bookshelves, not tall enough to reach the upper shelves. A howling gust of wind made them take interest in the contents of the books.

It wasn't long until they figured out what the books in the lower levels all had in common - arbitrary bullshit on how to be useful to your community merely as a tool. A huge waste of time and paper. If anything, it was good material for sarcastic reading.

The books became more specific the higher the level they were on, the upper books were teachings on how to become a good knight. Of course, it wasn't out of place for these kinds of books to be somewhere like this; yet a swift eye movement of Vermillion's to examine the pages revealed the strict dogma the protectors of these lands were forced to endure.

They weren't very knowledgeable in the subject at hand, but they knew enough to figure out those routines and rituals were too much, even for those who swore to give up their soul and body to the servitude of a flag. A way of life based on irredeemability and punishment was not meant to create discipline - only fear of failure. From this, only desire to be recognized could spark, which came in the form of irredeemability and punishment. An endless cycle. Ouroboros. Hard to stray away from it if that's the only way one's been living.

The moment Vermillion returned the book to its place; they realized a note like the ones they were familiar with appeared in one of the higher shelves. At first glance, it had the same handwriting as the rest - but a more trained eye would've been able

to detect the way the writer's grip loosened. Minute detail aside, they didn't take long to rip the paper and read its contents.

'Year 1, March 8th:

Today I was introduced in detail to the Tower's library. I was lucky enough to have a guide explain its functions in their entirety. I wasn't able to take notes during the lecture, so I asked a colleague if I could borrow his so I could add them to today's entry - contrasting the information he wrote down with my own memories of the visit.

This single-entrance architectonic marvel was once built with the intention of sharing the most basic knowledge for everybody, while the more advanced theories remain at the higher shelves. This system has been implemented splendidly - creating a vertical chamber made it harder to access the higher knowledge to those who weren't granted knighthood status, given that we are the only ones who are in possession of ladders high enough to reach the upper levels.

As a complementary safety measure, it is prohibited for visitors to bring any sort of item into the library, in order to prevent direct damage or vandalism - if they were to enter with items, they would be confiscated of their belongings at the entrance, only for them to be returned once they exited the library.

Only a selected few erudites have access to the books on the highest shelves. This is because those works have been deemed too controversial, as they would break the mind of the average civilian. Controversial books are to be sent to the highest levels of the library for revision, and, depending on the severity of their content, they will either get sent to other libraries or get burnt.

I truly understand the curiosity of the visitors. Nevertheless, it is impossible for me to convince them that this is the purpose of the library's structure. We cannot risk their sanity, to protect them is our duty.

We shall show them the way.'

Vermillion was about to return the page to its place, yet they were unable to. The wheatpaste had already lost most of its stickiness, and the outer walls of the shelves weren't smooth enough to hold a sheet of paper anyhow.

Taking another glance at the serrated surface, they found out that if they followed it horizontally, they would find the rest of the smaller ladders connected to this circuit by small wheels on the ends of the ladders. They decided to save this one note in their mane this time around, just to be sure. Immediately after, they went to the nearest ladder of the bunch.

Their hunch was true: the wheels could be detached and reattached from the circuit if they applied enough force. Confirming this fact was enough for them to start climbing. Once they were at the top of the ladder, they made two small gaps between the books they had in front of them, and then placed their feet in said gaps. Their grip on the shelf was inhuman as they impossibly contorted their body in order to grab the ladder, flip it over, and attach the wheels that were previously touching the ground into the upper circuit.

They repeated this cycle as they climbed. Up, gap, reattach. Up, gap, reattach. Up, gap, reattach. The task was a great feat, as the ladder kept on wobbling every time they climbed it - it was only attached to the wall with wheels, after all. That being said, while they might have shown respect for the literature of the room, as they got higher, they opted to throw the books to the ground instead of pushing them aside in order to make their exit swift.

One cast away book was enough to remind them how far away they were from the ground. Up, gap, reattach. Every time they went up the ladder, the time between them throwing the books and said books hitting the ground only went up - and the noise kept fading away. Up. So much effort had been wasted in trying to climb that the height they had reached had completely gone over their head. Gap. In a moment, the lack of support that could protect them against falling became painfully apparent to them. Reattach. Up, gap, reattach. Up, gap, reattach.

Up.

Vermillion did everything they could to not look down.

Gap.

To ignore the sound of the book covers against cold stone.

Reattach.

To maintain balance while they moved the ladder and it moved them.

Up.

"What happened?"

"I don't know..."

Tutor and student were reunited again privately. She sat uncomfortably in her broom; they held a failed exam.

"Did you get nervous? Is that it?"

"No...?" Dutchess replied, avoiding Vermillion's ice-cold stare.

"Then what? The test wasn't even that difficult."

"I know, I know, it's just... I don't know, I just can't."

"But... I don't get it, Dutchess. Why is it so difficult for you? You ask me every single detail, you understand everything I teach in class, and now you don't have any issues when people ask you questions... but when the exam comes around, something happens to you."

"I... I don't know what it is."

"Does your mind go blank?"

"...Not exactly, no." She fiddled with her hands as she explained herself. "It's as if, like, as if I wasn't processing that I'm taking an exam."

"Excuse me?"

"What I'm trying to say is that the... the, um, moment I enter the classroom, I'm already out by the time I realize it. I can't remember anything. The questions, the answers I gave... some days I can't even remember what subject the test was about."

"Hm... and I suppose the contrary also applies during the exam, no? When you lose your concentration, you forget everything you've studied until you get out of the exam room."

Upon hearing them say those words, Dutchess let out a sigh she didn't realize she was holding.

"I think so too, but I can't know for sure."

"Does this also happen outside of school?"

"I think so...? Although it's less frequent."

"You should really consider seeing a professional about this. I don't think there's any kid in class who knows how to conjure an amnesia spell, and I don't think there's anyone who could be so cruel to target you specifically."

Truth be told, they had no idea what was wrong with that poor girl, and they didn't want to apply an overprotective measure without knowing what they were fighting against first. The best thing they could do is wait for a diagnosis before trying anything.

"Can't you do something? Like, I don't know, changing the test to an essay..."

"Dutchess, if I change the way I examine you, I have to change the way I examine everyone else, too. It would give you an advantage over everyone else at the class. Do you understand that?"

"I guess if you look at it that way..."

"Hey, come on, don't be like that, girl. Look, I might not know how to help you, but I know if you study harder, you will easily pass."

It was getting late; the warm orange sunlight colored the room while Dutchess internalized Vermillion's speech. This light, combined with the silence that split them both apart, was enough to prove that they both wanted to go home, despite not having found a mutually satisfactory solution. Vermillion felt guilty of not knowing how to act, yet the only thing they had come up with was to take an expert's advice, when it arrived. If it arrived.

This was just another example of what Vermillion had to put up with every day. They truly loved their students, but hated having to take responsibility for each and every single of their personal problems - they could understand it to some degree, but they were enough to make them doze off. Vermillion's routine consisted of 5 days a week receiving complaints, and then 2 days preparing material for which they later received complaints, day after day - well, except on vacation leave.

Just thinking about vacation leave was enough to give Vermillion a headache. Oh, how they missed being on vacation! They wondered when the next one would be, but omitted the calculation to save them the despair remembering they had returned from their vacation not too long ago would bring them. The mental effort it took them to think about the time they had to keep their composure was enough to develop an ulcer. They didn't want to evade their duties, but if the stress kept on creeping on them, they would have no other choice.

When their headache faded away, Dutchess had already left.

SECOND SCENE

Same whereabouts as the last time the four got together, nighttime still. THE RIGHTEOUS in the middle of the room, with a broom and slurring something inaudible, grumpy. Sweeps the dust of the room into a pile of trash beside the exit. THE FORTUNATE gets revealed to the audience, comes out from underneath the duvet and gets out of bed. While THE RIGHTEOUS is looking at the pile, THE FORTUNATE tiptoes hither.

THE RIGHTEOUS: *(Turns around fast before the other can reach)* Took you long enough.

THE FORTUNATE: *(Jumps in shock and trips to the ground)* Ow! How did you even know I was in there?

THE RIGHTEOUS: You'll learn when you're older. How was the nap?

THE FORTUNATE: *(Stands up and wipes away the dust in the clothes)* It was alright, but I don't feel very well rested.

THE RIGHTEOUS: *(Stops sweeping)* I see. Should you need to return to the land of Morpheus, I will watch over you.

THE FORTUNATE: No, no, it's not necessary. I tried to go back earlier, when I was stuck underneath the blankets, but I can't sleep. Did I miss anything?

THE RIGHTEOUS: Not much - those two went God-knows-where and I haven't heard from them since. In the meantime, I've been sweeping the floors to kill some time.

THE FORTUNATE: I'll help you!

THE RIGHTEOUS: I appreciate it, but I'm almost finished.

THE FORTUNATE: Then we shall finish twice as fast! *(Takes the same broom THE RIGHTEOUS is holding)*

THE RIGHTEOUS: Let go! *(They both struggle with the broom, each one of them grabbing it with their right hand)*

They fight over the broom for a few seconds. THE FORTUNATE trips with the strength of THE RIGHTEOUS and they both fall on top of the trash pile, scattering it. While they got up and regretted the waste, two figures came from below the bed: first THE MONK, and then THE DAMNED. This last one doesn't react to the

commotion and opts to stay closer to the bed, while THE MONK approaches the other two perplexed.

THE MONK: What exactly is it that you been doing?

THE FORTUNATE: (*Points at THE RIGHTEOUS*) She started it!

THE RIGHTEOUS: What do you mean I started it? Damn brat, I'll make you remember the taste of my knuckles!

THE MONK: Prithee, let there be peace! Our return brings news about the visitor.

THE FORTUNATE: Did they fall for the trap already?

THE MONK: No, not quite yet.

THE RIGHTEOUS: Excuse my ignorance, but, "the trap"?

THE FORTUNATE: Oh, right, you weren't there. Patience, friend, you'll see. (*To THE MONK*) What do you have to say, then?

THE MONK: Let it be known that the last time our eyes saw them, they were climbing the shelves of the library.

THE RIGHTEOUS: Climbing up the walls? That's stupid, why would they do that?

THE FORTUNATE: Isn't it obvious? To let us push them once they reach the top and break their legs. Oh, the sound of broken muscle with their cries of pain would be fantastic! A splendid harmony, the panacea against boredom. (*Cackles*)

THE MONK: As much as that would help us stop them in their tracks, I believe this is not the ideal solution to the problem they present.

THE FORTUNATE: Buzzkill...

THE RIGHTEOUS: Well, what does climbing the library have to do with anything?

THE MONK: I suppose you all been familiar with the structure of the room. There is only one entrance, which as of right now is connected to the cathedral.

THE RIGHTEOUS: Don't tell me... they're looking for the other exit, the hatch?

THE MONK: So we believe. It seems as though, now that they have gotten their prize, they only want to exit as quickly as possible.

THE FORTUNATE: But they couldn't have seen it from the ground!

THE MONK: Very true. Only a person with an incredibly sharp sight could have been able to see it, but that is not important. The thing that worries us the most is their perseverance. Who would risk their life in such a way?

THE FORTUNATE: They're getting away. We must act!

THE MONK: Which is why we set up the trap, we must now wait for them to fall for it. (*Turns to face THE MARTYR*) Isn't that right?

THE MARTYR is sitting on the ground, asleep, snoring. The three of them sigh - THE RIGHTEOUS puts THE MARTYR on top of the bed. THE FORTUNATE picks up the broom and starts cleaning again. THE MONK exits the room, crestfallen and pensive.

Sweat went down Vermillion's neck while laying on the ground after passing through the hatch. They caught their breath; their vision fixated on the ceiling of the new room. The sheer amount of both mental and physical effort had brought them an unimaginable amount of stress - they didn't even know how they managed to survive. After calming down for a bit, they painfully and slowly stood back up. The next day they would wake up with sore feet, they thought.

And yet a different pain was born in their stomach upon looking at the room. A vast dining room lay before them, a high ceiling, an ornate unlit chandelier, banners and tapestries greeted them. A great orange stained-glass window with an aviary design would've lit the large, long table in the middle of the room, had it not been eclipsed by a darkening tall chair sitting between them. Said table was full of diverse dishes: salad, steak, onion soup, tongue, pork jowl, sautéed asparagus and mushrooms, omelette, empanadas, sea bass, escargot, iguana, rustic bread, apple pie, croissants, wild berries, charcuterie and cheese boards, among others. The smell penetrated their nasal cavities and made their stomach rumble. They regretted not having eaten anything before embarking on the excursion, and had no memories of the last time they ate.

As they stepped closer to the table, a small detail became apparent: the vertical chair in front of the window was the only one in the whole room. In other words, not only had someone prepared a king's feast, but also had prepared it for only one person - whether that was the cook themselves or someone else, they couldn't know for sure. Such banquet was splendid, but the thought of someone engulfing every single dish was enough to make them nauseous. Pushing that thought aside, they got even closer to the table.

They took one of the smallest buns out of a basket, so that the dinner guest wouldn't miss it. They drew it close to their helmet to sniff it - nothing out of the ordinary, only the smell of freshly baked bread. One of their sharp gauntlet's fingers pierced the bun and made it easier to split into two and inspect it for poison. Only a cloud of steam escaped the innards of the bun and nothing else.

Satisfied with the inspection, and upon checking there really wasn't anyone else in the room, they used their free hand to dislocate the golden, frontal part of their helmet - the one right in front of their nose and mouth - and left it on top of the table as to not lose it. Right after that, they freed their mouth from the black neck gaiter underneath to bite it.

In an instant, everything else became irrelevant. The warm, glutinous texture, the flavor, the crunchy crust... Vermillion's mind went blank as they chewed. Truly, all else paled in comparison after a long time without eating; especially if the food

that filled one's stomach was one of their favorites. They weren't able to express the absolute bliss such ambrosia brought them.

Helmet piece came along with its owner while they sat down on the chair to sink their teeth into the rest of the meal course. Having discarded all manners towards the dinner guest that never came, their mind was only capable of enjoying themselves with anything their fork was able to reach. Every bite was an umami explosion, each bigger than the last - they even dared to try the dishes they never were fond of. That joy was something they thought could never experience. Oh, how wonderful it is to eat! Had they only been able to rejoice in the wonders of flavors earlier, they would've avoided many headaches. In that moment, they understood why someone would order so much food in one sitting.

After engulfing and clearing several dishes, flavors started mixing in their mouth, so they opted for some liquid to cleanse the palette and give their taste buds a break. They brought the closest chalice up to their lips, yet caught themselves before bringing it closer. A familiar stench fully inundated their sense of smell. Hints of fruit and fermentation were evident. Vermillion didn't even know why they bothered looking at the contents of the recipient with their own eyes. Wine, red. It covered around three quarters of the chalice.

And so, they lost all appetite.

Hundreds of thoughts rushed through their head, each more frantic than the last. To be fair, accompanying food with wine was perfectly fine, so the person who filled the chalice probably didn't do it out of malice. The lack of bad intentions, however, didn't dissipate their unease.

'Just a glass won't be so bad.'

They showed a colossal amount of resistance by putting the chalice on top of the table again. The wretched thing weighed a ton, and at the same time was the lightest object they could've ever had held.

'Just a small sip, come on.'

Despite that, it wasn't that easy for their hand to let go of it. How interesting it was, how difficult to kick some habits were compared to others.

'Just a drop and nothing else, promise.'

They covered themselves with the neck gaiter and missing helmet piece in order to snap out of it. Immediately after, they got up from the chair to check if there were any other liquids that could wash their pallet clean. Not a single water pitcher was to be seen, however. Having found no substitute, they sat back down, and just as they were to glance at the chalice again, they spotted something with the corner of their eye. They quickly turned around, but there was nothing there - only the void of the dining room smiling back at them.

Their addiction backfired exponentially. In an effort to recover what was left of their sanity, they rested their elbows on the table and slammed their helmet onto their hands. In that very moment, they noticed a note in front of their empty plate. The paper was of the same quality as the ones before it, but this note was significantly different to the rest. It lacked letters, and instead lay a graffito big enough to cover the whole page. The drawing of a right hand cut by the wrist, pointing upwards with its index finger. Curiosity got the best of them, and they followed the direction with their eyes. At the very end of the room, aligned with the invisible line drawn by the finger, was another note, similar to the one they had before them - if anything, this one was stuck to the wall horizontally, pointing to the left. Once again, they followed the way the hand was pointing, and a new door had appeared on the wall that was once empty.

If alcohol wouldn't make them crazy, that place indubitably would, they thought. Certainly, they had no idea what that damn ghoul wanted out of them. Why bother putting up these clues to indicate what they interpreted as the exit instead of kicking them out the window or something? What a waste of time, it was clear he enjoyed disorienting them and taking them wherever he pleased. A wretched game, truly - and yet the only way left.

They got up once more to check if the hatch from whence they came still existed. Just as they thought, it had vanished. The only exit had changed its position once more, now manifesting in the wall. Was there any limit on how many rooms the ghost could connect at the same time? They crouched and touched the floor in order to check that this was not an eye trick or a similar scheme and that it had really disappeared. The stone tile was rigid; too much, in fact - there was no crevice perceivable by touch or sight, it really was as if there never had been a hatch in there.

Once satisfied with the inspection, they got up to avoid having more leg cramps the next day and headed towards the door. As expected, it was tangible and firm, made out of the same wooden material as the frame, hinges and knob out of iron, no knocker or window. A regular door, present in many homes. However, the familiarity said door brought them wasn't what prohibited Vermillion from entering the room ahead, but the circumstances of its existence. Would the next room manifest the moment they opened the door, or did it already exist before the door appeared? Was there any guarantee that, once they crossed the door, the dining room would still exist? Was this really the way out, or was it another trick to disorient them and recover the orb? Every question that popped inside their head didn't matter anymore. Whatever was on the other side, they were ready to overcome it and achieve victory, as they always did. The wounds that ghost's stones made were nothing to them, they were sure they would surmount every single one of its stupid and ephemeral challenges. They firmly took the doorknob and opened the door wide.

Yet all their valor faded away the moment they stepped down the first two treads into the chamber.

She was late that day. They both knew she would be late, so they arranged it to another time in which both of them could attend. They didn't know the reason why she wasn't able to enter at the right time, but they didn't care. The important thing is that they were both present at that time.

The classroom was empty when they arrived. A minute passed. Two, three, five, ten, thirty, an hour, two hours. Their eyes unnerving, fixated on the way she couldn't stop writing. Not a single time did she look away from the paper in front of her without reason, only to ask for more paper once she had run out of space.

Vermillion thought the reason she failed so much was because of the chaos and the pressure of being crammed together with fellow classmates - that's why they initially thought it was good that she came late that day. And yet the cold atmosphere that sprouted between them rapidly gave birth to nervousness.

If that wasn't enough, she was risking a considerable percentage of the final score. For a moment, they considered leaving her alone in the room so she could write in peace, but they couldn't risk any cheating. She wasn't the kind of girl to copy during tests, but they weren't the kind of person to leave any margin for their students to try anything funny. They knew how desperate she was to pass, and knew desperate people tend to do things they wouldn't even consider in normal scenarios.

And, of course, watching over her meant the test was completed with no abnormalities. They wondered if it would've been any different had the circumstances changed. Would she have been less nervous had she not arrived late? Would her grade have been altered had they not been looking at her all the time? Would she really have cheated had they left the room?

All those questions became irrelevant when Dutchess let go of her quill and handed them the papers.

"So, how was it?"

No response. She hurriedly gathered her stationery and prepared to leave, without even looking at her professor.

"Girl, there's no rush. I'm not gonna correct it in front of you."

"I need to leave," she instantly answered back. She abruptly pushed herself away from the table and headed towards the exit, hunched over while grasping her broom and crestfallen.

"Dutchess, wait!"

And she did as instructed. She stopped in the middle of the classroom. A couple of seconds passed before she looked at Vermillion over her shoulder, with visible surprise in her eye.

"Mx. von Kavalier?"

"What questions did I write down?"

"What?" She fully turned around in order to properly see them.

"I don't want you to tell me how you've answered the questions, I want you to repeat the questions I asked you."

"The... exam questions... ummm..."

"Dutchess, come on! You just handed it to me!"

"I'm sorry, I truly don't remem--"

"How can you not remember?! Is this subject that worthless to you that you can't even remember?" Their tone change scared her even more. "If you can't even recall what I've asked of you, how am I supposed to know you didn't make up the answers? What am I supposed to do with this test now, Dutchess? What do I do with it?!"

Once again, the room filled up with suffocating silence. Dutchess was forced to break eye contact in order for her professor to not see her cry.

If there was something Vermillion hated was wasting time. Ironical, in a way, as they were very good at messing with people and making them listen to things they aren't interested in. Anyhow, they saw it as an insult - no matter their efforts to get an empty classroom for her to do her test in peace, her attitude was enough proof to convince them she didn't appreciate the sacrifices they had to make for her. Each day that passed, their belief in her memory issues faded, and instead the conviction that she just used it as an excuse to not make an effort to pass was born. In that moment, their brain was able to make that theory into reality - all on its own.

Vermillion wasn't the kind of person to let disrespect slide, whether intentional or not. No matter how teary their opponent's eyes were when confronted, or how sorry they were.

Before Dutchess could exit the room sobbing, Vermillion broke the silence with a sigh for the umpteenth time.

"I don't get you, Dutchess." She stopped on her tracks for the last time. "I really don't."

However, not once did she turn around.

"I know."

And then she was gone.

THIRD SCENE

The action in the Tower's passageways. The four of them walking through them. THE FORTUNATE is the first in line, THE MONK just behind. THE DAMNED is asleep again, in the hands of THE RIGHTEOUS, who is behind the rest.

THE RIGHTEOUS: What in the world just happened?

THE MONK: We know not more than thee, good friend. The bang in the lower levels doth not give us much room to guess, at least not just by itself.

THE FORTUNATE: Hey, come on, pick it up! We have to be quicker, or we'll miss it!

THE RIGHTEOUS: What even is there to miss?

THE FORTUNATE: Sigh, you really are falling behind, aren't you, grandpa? I only wish not to get as washed up as you at your age. May God have mercy on me and end my suffering soon! Monk, be useful for once and explain it swiftly.

THE MONK: (*Embarrassed*) It appears our friend is not the only one who doeth not understand what our dearest young master is talking about.

THE FORTUNATE: You too?! Oh, how ingenuous you lot can be, how tedious it is to coexist with you! Bah, no matter, you'll get it when we're there, you'll see.

THE MONK: Perchance it hath to do with our guest?

THE FORTUNATE: Well, what do you think? They're the most likely to have caused it, after all.

THE RIGHTEOUS: Ah, I think I understand. Heh, heh, how weak one's mind can be. The barrel probably fell on top of them as they tried to pick it up and drink. I knew sending them to the wine cellar was a good idea, living beings are such simple creatures!

THE MONK: Certainly - I, too, am starting to comprehend the cause of the bang. Any person their age would be attracted to that concoction. Our heart holds no grudge against them. To be witness to such outpouring of desire will be an honor. Nevertheless, it would be unwise of us to overlook other possibilities.

THE FORTUNATE: I'm glad you were able to come to the same conclusion as I. But what you said is also true, monk. We must stay alert, we still don't know what that character is capable of.

THE MONK: Yes, indubitably. However, we shall keep our objective in mind.

THE RIGHTEOUS: Are we really gonna play along with...? (*Nods towards THE DAMNED, fast asleep still*) You know.

THE MONK: I am afraid we have no other choice, for it is our last hope.

THE FORTUNATE: I'm with grandpa on this one, for once. It's entirely possible that this plan fails. Besides, I think we acted too late.

THE MONK: And what dost thou suggest? Go back in time to warn everyone our guest was what we were looking for whilst they entered our home? That, for starters, is not possible - and secondly, even if it were, they would consider us insane.

THE FORTUNATE: I'm just saying don't get mad at me if this goes south.

THE RIGHTEOUS: The feeling is mutual, young'un, but I suppose we also have nothing left to lose. If we're really doing this, we have to give it our all.

THE FORTUNATE: (*Stops walking*) It's here.

The four of them stand in front of two doors of enormous proportions. Both wooden doors are closed. THE MONK's right hand takes one of the iron doorknobs.

THE MONK: (*Turns around to face the rest*) I shall deploy the knight now, are ye prepared?

THE FORTUNATE and THE RIGHTEOUS nod.

THE MONK: Court is now in session.

When Vermillion came back to their senses, they did so with a tremendous headache.

Morning sun came through the skylight, blinded them entirely and worsened their condition. They squinted in order to process the incandescent shimmer of the star, and covered it with their hand in order to get up from the ground and sit.

They took their time to realize how soft the ground was compared to the rest of the rooms they were in. Contrary to what they had expected, they landed on grass. For a second, they believed they had escaped the Tower, but that belief faded away once they realized they were in a courtyard. They were, in fact, dangerously close to the border of a fountain in the middle of the room - they probably lost consciousness after hitting their head against it. The place itself wasn't all that bad: pleasing sunlight blessed the courtyard with diverse vegetation, hallways and marble pillars on the sides of it. The sound of water running and insects singing, along with the warmth of the sun and the fresh air that ran through the skylight gave an ever so calming sensation.

The only thing out of place were some orange-stained glass shards scattered across the ground, not very far away from where Vermillion was sitting. There was, however, no trace of the window that held that stained glass in place. Maybe...?

"Careful with the fountain."

A familiar voice snapped them out of their trance and forced them to jump straight up. It was that damn hooded knight again. His bones shone blue in the darkness the pillar he was leaning on bestowed on to him.

"The plumbing on that thing is my forebear's legacy, a single tile is worth more than you could ever afford in a thousand years of your miserable life." The ghost floated towards them.

"Stand back!" Vermillion tried to look for the torch in vain, as they had forgotten they had already discarded it.

"About time you woke up. Drank that much, huh?"

Vermillion could feel their cheeks burning red.

"No!! And, back, I said! This orb is now mine!" They got away from it.

"You can keep it if you really want it, I don't care anymore."

"Then let me leave!"

"I'm afraid we cannot allow that," it threatened while cornering them between its armor and the fountain.

A loud gulp could be heard from Vermillion. In an instant, the sun's sweet embrace became a torrid trap. Before they could realize it, they were stuck between a rock and a hard place, quite literally.

Vermillion then decided to jump towards the top of the tower and above the ghost to give themselves a little more margin of error. Once their feet met the ground again, they rushed towards their adversary to take a swipe with their left talon. His reaction skills, however, were superb and he managed to dodge the attack with ease. Vermillion tried to attack it once more, adding punches, slaps in the face, and throwing stones they found on the ground. All their attempts were in vain, however, as the ghost dodged them without any sign of fighting back.

"Art thou done? We have matters to discuss."

"Yeah, right!" they panted.

"As thou wish."

And so, Vermillion kept trying to lay a finger on it, each attempt more futile than the last. Clearly, with this line of attack the only thing they would achieve was more exhaustion. After a couple more direct attacks, they stopped to catch their breath, hands on their knees.

"Well?"

Its gaze was so intense it could effortlessly pierce a hole through Vermillion's helmet.

"Just... what... do you want?" they choked on their words as they looked back at him.

"I wish to know how thou did it."

"...How I did what?"

"How thou managed to crack open the library and the dining room. How thou knew about access to other rooms when there was no trace of any doors."

"What? Is that it? Did you seriously come here just to ask me something like that?"

"I beg of thee, just limit thyself to answer."

Vermillion was perplexed. What kind of trick was it planning? They'd better reply swiftly if they knew what was good for them, they thought.

"Well, I don't know what you want me to tell you. Regarding the library, I simply knew. You can call it intuition, if you wanna give it a name."

"But that is impossible! The hatch is too high up to be visible from the ground floor. There's no way thou could have seen it with thy own eyes!"

"I know that, stupid. Never did I say I saw it from the ground. All I've said is I knew it was there. You're right when you say there's no way I could've seen it if I hadn't gotten close to it, but that doesn't mean I couldn't guess it was there."

"Th-then it was a spell! Thou conjured an incantation to find the nearest exit, ergo, the hatch."

"What are you talking about? I'm the most inept person in the world when it comes to magic. No, I didn't guess there was a hatch with an incantation, spell or similar magical element. I just knew, alright?"

"Oh, really? Well, what about this? Thou used the usurped crystal ball to get a hint on how to escape."

"Are you even listening to me? I already said I didn't use any magical element. Of course, by 'magical element' I didn't mean just spells, but also any other material or tool that would help me control magic, like a wand or a broom. Therefore, the possibility of me using the orb has been discarded since the beginning. Heh, heh, heh... and here I thought it was redundant to even mention it at the time. I'm surprised at how little you make use of your brain."

"Then...! Then...!! Thou saw a blueprint of the library in one of the books!! Of course, our library has just about anything. It is only reasonable that there was a copy of the blueprints in one of the books!"

"Hm, nice try. Still, I fear you're mistaken. None of the books I inspected had any kind of blueprint, drawing, or graffito of the library's structure. What's more is that none of them even had any illustrations! And hear this! The only text I read on the library that had anything to do with it, was the stray page stuck to the wall! The sum of all these factors makes it impossible for me to have learned the whereabouts of the hatch visually, whether by text or images!!"

"Argh... but, that... doth not make any sense! How, then?!"

"It's like I told you, you dunce. I used intuition. Thanks to intuition I was able to know there was a hatch without needing to check if it was actually there or not."

"Preposterous! It is simply impossible to 'know' with no proof! It is not as if, the moment thou were convinced the hatch was there, that thought became reality and it just appeared!! That is only possible in fiction, not real life!! Thou must have used some external method to figure it out!"

"So that's how it is, huh? In that case, about that external method, can you tell me what it is exactly?"

"What? What part of 'external method' dost thee not understand?! An external method is an utensil, a path, or even a person unconnected to the one who needs it, and which helps them get a determined thing!"

"True, but you didn't specify what kind of external method I used, according to you. You can't just say 'you figured it out with a process I don't know of, and for that same reason I refuse to explain it'. Unless you can explain to me how I used that external method, or the specific external method I used, I fear I cannot say whether this line of attack is correct or incorrect. I refuse to accept an answer without basis!"

Vermillion didn't know how, but they masterfully managed to turn the chessboard around. In the blink of an eye, they went from fearing their integrity to taking full control of the situation. Never had they expected to change their roles to be so easy: the hunter became the hunted. Denying every single one of the knight's ludicrous theories was enough to fill them with pride, and it in turn fed their ego exponentially. The smile underneath their helmet turned grim while realizing they were enjoying his suffering.

The ghost's mind spun around, he fell into an abyss of his own making. None of the answers it came up with were stable enough to be considered the truth. He dug his own grave by not considering the situation more carefully. The more he thought, the more his head spun, and the more he wanted to disappear.

And, for some reason, something inside it changed. That same pressure was what it needed to come to a flawless conclusion. Was that it? Was it really that simple? In an instant, feeling so awful about such a simple matter made it feel silly.

"Is that all you got?! How can it be? Has the feared Tower's protector given up on finding the truth? Even a kid would be able to do it, and without any clues, no less! Your anger is clouding your senses, Verdi. Come, try to remember. Everything you need to figure it out has already been handed out to you, or are you really that slow?"

"That's Sir Vertigo to you! I will not rest until I find the truth hidden in your slander! First of all, I will try to follow your 'intuition' logic. According to you, you simply knew there was a hatch in the ceiling of the library thanks to your 'intuition'. Everybody knows it is impossible to figure something out without any proof, at least in this world. It's because of that that I believe this 'intuition' of yours is only a series of events that, once tied logically, could make you come to the conclusion with high probabilities of it being true."

"I know what intuition is, you don't need to describe it to me."

"That's why my next step will be to analyze the circumstances that made your 'intuition' exist. For starters, let's establish that you only knew of the existence to the library once you entered. Going through entrance would make you go back to

the cathedral, so the possibility to use this door as the exit has been discarded from the start. Having said that, once you investigated the library, I'm sure you realized all of the walls were filled to the brim with shelves with books, there was not a single window. In fact, I can say with certainty that the library was only lit up with torches and candles."

"That's right. I think you're starting to understand. It really is curious that there were no windows and there was no other exit, no?"

"So, I am correct. In that case, allow me to proceed with my reasoning: I must say, the fact that the ceiling wasn't visible from the ground was a huge advantage to you, as it let you discard thousands of probabilities instantaneously. It is true that this logic wouldn't have done you any good had you visited us a different day, so I must swear to take revenge on the luck that gave you this clue. You've probably already noticed before entering the Tower, but it's windy today. It's no windstorm, but, despite the wind that escapes our fingers being weak, it is enough for it to say hello with its evasive caress. So much so, that this very same wind, had it been a real closed room, never would have had the opportunity to enter the library. Nevertheless, the wind blew anyways. You've proven in many occasions that you're a sharp person, and I bet that in that moment you realized it. Yes, I'm sure of it, your shrewdness is nothing but admirable. The wind that existed in the library helped you decipher there was somewhere for it to pass through! Since it was impossible for it to have come from the entrance, or a nonexistent wall, or from any other place you could lay your eyes upon, like the ground, you thought it came from the only place you couldn't see! The ceiling!! In that moment you knew there was something in the ceiling that let air pass, and you could probably use it as an exit!!"

Devastating silence came after its speech, only for it to be interrupted by the sound of leather gloves clapping.

"Bravo! That's right, I knew where the exit was because of the wind, but in that moment, I didn't know what kind of exit it was. Oh, and thank you for leaving the hatch open, couldn't have done it without you." Vermillion cackled as they made fun of their adversary.

"Now, regarding the dining room," Sir Vertigo didn't waste any time, "I still do not understand how thou knew that, behind the window, there was a room with a skylight from where to enter."

"Oh, no, I didn't know."

Not a word was spoken.

"Excuse me?"

"I didn't know there was anything outside, I just wanted to get out of there."

"And thou directly jumped outside without second thoughts?!"

"I thought I was at ground level!"

"For the love of... clearly luck hath blessed thee today. Not only hath thou survived to the fall, but thou also passed through the skylight without even calculating from where to fall and at what speed. Magnificent, truly magnificent. Yet, allow us to ask, why would thou leave?"

"Whuh...? What do you mean why?" The question was borderline insulting to them.

"Was the wine not to thy liking? Fear not, that can be easily sol--"

"No! No." Vertigo was surprised it was interrupted in such a way, as it was convinced everybody liked wine. "Forget about it. Where's the exit?"

"What's the rush? I am aware we started off on the wrong foot, but I promise thee thy stay will be the best we will ever provide. At least, let us hear thy name."

They couldn't believe what was happening. That was, without a doubt, the most surreal situation Vermillion was ever a part of. They couldn't help but to burst at that nonsense.

"What is your problem?! First you wanna kill me and now you wanna act like we're friends?"

"I know what you are."

The sudden tone change made a shiver run through Vermillion's spine. The warmth of the garden escaped when a cloud eclipsed the sun. The only light that was left was the cold one that radiated from the knight.

"You remain unsatiated with the average enigma, you like to rummage in the guts of mystery. You're one of those so-called 'intellectophiles'."

"You just made that up."

"Now I understand your reasoning to enter the Tower. We're not so different, you and I. We both wish to conquer knowledge, in a way."

"So? I got what I want, let me go," they retorted while they turned around to find another exit.

"What if I told you, you could get more?"

Vermillion looked at him over their shoulder.

"Why do you think I'm interested?"

"You just proved it to me. The fire in your eyes whenever you decipher a problem is enough proof to ensure the artifacts we have will provide great entertainment.

For you see, this is no ordinary Tower, but a huge bastion and archive filled with relics of diverse cultures with an insurmountable academic value."

"Is that so? Then how come I haven't heard anything of the sort?"

"That's due to the access being restricted. Only those with certain traits, like myself, have access to it. Any person who tried to uncover the marvels of its innards would find the end of their journey instead. So, what do you say? I will be delighted to provide you with your own room and food if you so desire. You shall become a guest of Honor, like in the Tower's golden age."

Vermillion calculated their words before replying.

"I've heard the more one enters the Tower, the less likely they are to come out. Is this true?"

"That's just a disproportionate rumor, nothing like reality. We just take adequate measures when a nosy third party wants to discover something they shouldn't know. You, however, are different - and I apologize for not having found out sooner. You will understand in due time, if you give me the chance to show you."

"What do you get out of this?"

"Is it really that unreasonable to want a little bit of company? This line of work tends to be lonely. Besides, I can also learn how the outside world is doing, too. Let us interchange information! A fair trade, no?"

"But, I still don't get it. Why do you trust me? Everything I've done up until now was rob and insult you, what makes you think I'm someone worthy of trust?"

"I told you, didn't I?"

Vertigo stopped levitating and put its feet on the ground, making their height difference less severe. Vermillion interpreted this as a white flag, that he stopped trying to act intimidating and the both of them would be on equal footing.

"Because we're the same."

In that instant, Sir Vertigo raised arm to grab the border of his white hood with his fingers. Having done that, he lifted the thin fabric that covered his face and it turned into blue sparkles, along with the rest of the bony ornaments he wore.

The blue light that emitted from its figure was enough to blind Vermillion for a couple of seconds. However, after some time had passed, a radiant face was presented in front of them, illuminated by the skeleton right beneath it. Its shoulder-length hair hugged its sharp features sweetly, hiding the burned half of its face. A pair of filed down horns shyly stuck out in its mane.

"Here is the truth! This is my proof that you are exactly the same as I! Can't you see? Your destiny brought you here! Now everything makes sense!"

"...And what is it exactly that you're revealing?"

"The horns. Your horns! We are the same! It is my duty to accept inside the Tower anybody of my same species! You're lucky you have the genes of such powerful race! This is why I invite you to train your mind and body in this here lair, until your thirst for knowledge is quenched."

Sir Vertigo's ultimatum left Vermillion stunned. Confused after so many mixed messages, they didn't know what to believe. They really didn't want to spend any more time with that maniac, but taking the effort it took them to get there and the offer of food and refuge into account, they had second thoughts. Truly, it would be a good inversion, given his murderous tendencies were no longer. Besides, they already risked themselves to fetch the orb from him, but letting other unknown treasures pass would be unwise of them. They had no other choice.

"I accept," was their response as they got closer to the center of the garden and stared into the fountain.

"Wonderful!! I shall make thy stay the most divine of stays, guest of Honor! One more thing, may I please be worthy of knowing thy name?"

At the bottom of the fountain, they could see several golden coins - the same type as the one Vertigo wore on his head ornament. They also saw their reflections staring back at them.

"Vermillion."

Chapter 3: Leviathan

There are scenes in this chapter that depict non-sexual nudity, child abuse and suicidal ideation.



FOURTH SCENE

CANNON FODDER and THE VULTURE going down a long and dark spiral stairway. CANNON FODDER being in front of THE VULTURE serves two purposes: being a beam of light for THE VULTURE and for them not to distrust CANNON FODDER. CANNON FODDER with his hood and head ornaments again. The quatriumvirate is omnipresent and expecting, but they're on no one's line of sight.

THE MONK: See? How everything turned out wonderfully in the end?

THE FORTUNATE: I must say, despite my doubts, it was smooth sailing. I didn't think such a ridiculous idea would work.

THE DAMNED: Ye of little faith...

THE FORTUNATE: *(Gets scared by THE DAMNED's apparition)* Eek! Stop it!!

THE RIGHTEOUS: I suppose this "trap" of yours has already started?

THE DAMNED: Something like that, but I wouldn't celebrate our victory just yet. This fight is not over, so don't ruin it.

THE MONK: Yes, my--

THE FORTUNATE: Hey, what do you mean by 'don't ruin it'? You're part of this as well!

THE MONK: Young master! *(Turns to face THE DAMNED)* Prithee, forgive its audaciousness. Children these days art truly uncontrollable...

THE DAMNED shows no expression. THE MONK gulps.

THE RIGHTEOUS: I'm gonna be honest, I'm still lost. Anyway, truth is, whatever we did has been good enough for now. Do whatever you please. If you need me, you know how to call me.

THE MONK: Oh, leaving so soon?

THE FORTUNATE: Awww! But you just came back... Who's gonna cause mischief with me? I still haven't planned how to rip our guest's flesh from their bone!

THE RIGHTEOUS: I'm feeling rather unwell, and I feel like it's only gonna get worse should you tell me what that trap is all about. I apologize, but please tell me at another time. I shall rest for a bit.

THE DAMNED: May you rest well, soldier. (*THE RIGHTEOUS, THE MONK and THE FORTUNATE turn towards THE DAMNED, astonished*) What?

THE RIGHTEOUS: (*Surprise evident in her voice*) ...Thank you.

THE RIGHTEOUS exits. In the meantime, CANNON FODDER and THE VULTURE still go down the endless stairway.

THE MONK: I believe we might have set up too many steps...

THE DAMNED: (*Laughs*) Nonsense. They will help our guest wake up, force them not to fall down the stairs and think twice before placing their next step.

THE FORTUNATE: Oh, how easy it would be to trip them up...

THE MONK: The time hath not yet come. We must follow the plan; thou ought to stay serene for the time being.

THE FORTUNATE: Argh! If only the trap didn't work out so--

THE VULTURE: (*To CANNON FODDER, ignoring the existence of the quatriumvirate*) Are we there yet?

THE FORTUNATE: Oh, I'll handle this. (*Puts right hand where CANNON FODDER's ear should be and moves mouth closer*)

CANNON FODDER: Patience, if you please. The less you entertain that thought, the sooner we will get there.

THE FORTUNATE leaves the side of the CANNON FODDER's face and goes back with the rest.

THE FORTUNATE: Well? What do you think?

THE MONK: Splendid! Wonderful acting! Thy ability to camouflage thyself in front of our guest is only getting better. It is truly an honor to be witness to thy evolution. I would clap if I could.

THE FORTUNATE: Heh, heh... See? This acting thing is in my blood, I tell you. (*Looks at THE DAMNED*) Unlike others, hm?

Before THE MONK can reprimand THE FORTUNATE again, THE DAMNED becomes inexpressive once more.

The moment they had left the stairs, Sir Vertigo accompanied Vermillion towards a long hallway perpendicular to the exit. There was no natural light, and to each side there were countless doors. The both of them followed it until Vermillion thought they were going to lose their feet from walking. In front of where they stood lay a wooden door identical to those they had already seen. Vertigo broke the silence first:

"This is it. Come on in."

To Vermillion's surprise, the door opened on its own. Inside was a welcoming chamber, bigger than the others in the tower.

"Go ahead," Vertigo insisted.

"It's... for me?"

"But of course! Surely thy travels were long and arduous in order to have been able to get here, so I imagine thou art exhausted. Furthermore, I suppose thou art in need of some sleep after that luncheon, art we mistaken? That is precisely why we wish for thy rest, at least until tomorrow."

Vermillion looked at the interior of the room from the outside again. A double bed with a bedside table on each side. A large table and three chairs on the other side of the room. In front of the bed, a wardrobe with a silver mirror. In front of the table, another door that probably led to the restroom. A square rug between the bed and the table. Some dried flowers in frames, probably nasturtiums, on three of the four walls. A window with bars in the lonely wall. An unlit chandelier on the ceiling. The scent of flowers coated the room. They averted their gaze once more.

"Why? What's the catch?" that comment made Sir Vertigo snicker.

"There is no catch, it is our wish that our guest feels at home. It is the least we can do, is it not? Prithee, do not strain thy brain with this any longer and focus on resting. We shall resume our talk at dawn... Ah, how doth thee like thy eggs? In an omelette, fried, hard boiled?"

What was his deal? Before Vermillion knew, they were inside their room.

"I don't do breakfast."

"That was not our question."

"...Scrambled." Vermillion bit the inside of their cheek.

"Wonderful. We shall see each other tomorrow, then. Enjoy thy stay," and with that, it closed the door and left.

Silence came back to the room. Vermillion supposed they had no choice but to get comfortable, so they opted to take off their cape and storing it in the wardrobe. Inside they found a set of spare clothes should they had needed them, but they left them alone and instead sat on the edge of the bed. A hard mattress, the bedspread was soft to the touch.

They took the cathedral's orb out of their hair in search of anything that could ease their mind, but to no avail, no images were shown to them. They tried rotating and even hitting it, yet it was useless - every attempt resulted in the same outcome. Vermillion lifted the artifact with the intent of smashing it on the ground, but had second thoughts when they remembered it was made of glass. They ended up leaving it be on the bedside table. After a sigh and having rested their elbows over their knees, they removed the dagger from their boot and the paper sheet they stole from the library in a hurry in order to put them on top of the table.

This last object drew their attention. They read it again and again, in an attempt to decipher anything that lay in between lines, beyond words. They traced their talon across the sheet non-stop, analyzing every letter meticulously. Dried ink was the only thing they touched, so there was no risk of it bleeding and staining their gloves. Patient and round strokes were all they could see, and they made sure to never forget the look of those words to the point of being able to recite them. Any person who looked at that scene would've thought they wanted to scorch that page with their eyes only.

Those words rattled in their brain as they looked through the drawers of the bedside table. They mumbled fragments of what they had read while searching for something they could write with. Inside one of the drawers they found a guestbook, an ink bottle and a quill. Without even closing the drawer, they took them out and put them on the table. They skipped the gratitude messages on the first pages and went straight to the end of the guestbook to rip the pages they could write on. They started by copying the full text, and after that they noted down any kind of conclusion they had come to after analyzing it. A page ripped, then two, then three. Everything that went through their head was written down in order to explain what was wrong with it.

Why? Why the change of heart? Why the hospitality? Vermillion thought that by analyzing his words, or what remained of them, they would understand his motives. If X was the reason he changed his mind, then, according to them, X = some part of that note. The only thing left to do was solve for X - they were never especially good at math, but at least they knew how to do that. They *had* to figure it out. It couldn't have been because of the horn thing, that would've been too easy. If they wanted to find out the truth, they had to find those hidden intentions as soon as possible. For them, there was no other explanation, the only thing left was to find that reasoning. Hours passed before they left the table. Four, five, six pages

were ripped from the guestbook. The speed at which they wrote almost made the ink bottle spill on multiple occasions.

Sundown shone through the bars. Half an hour had passed since they stopped their search for the truth, their effort all for nothing. Having exited the adjacent restroom, they undid the bed without much energy in order to lay down. They quickly became uncomfortable, so they stood up again to remove some of their clothes. After that, they went back to bed and tucked themselves in. Between the hardness of the mattress, the flimsiness of the pillow, the thinness of the bed sheets and the mystery surrounding *Vertigo*, they could barely sleep that night. Concentrating on going to sleep did them no good, but they at least had the privilege of dozing off for a short while.

3

Year 1, October 3rd:

The Grace of God has blessed me once more.

(...)

When the clock struck 8, someone knocked on their door from the hallway. Their office was spotless, save for the column of documents on their desk. Most of them were pure formalities, just for signing and stamping. That was why they took that knock as a good omen - they were getting tired of writing, anyways.

"Come on in, door's open," they replied without taking their eyes off their work.

But the door didn't move. That was weird - their helmet wasn't usually a problem for their voice to be loud and clear.

"You can come in!"

No matter how much they raised their voice, the person on the other side did not seem to hear them. They clicked their tongue as they unwillingly stood up from their chair. They switched their point of view in a matter of seconds, no longer seeing this distraction as a good thing but rather as a nuisance. If the person on the hallway wasn't competent enough to hear them, they surely wouldn't be worth hearing out. When they reached the door, they grabbed the doorknob with force.

Opening the door was more interesting than they would've thought. The hallway was completely empty, there was no one there. They checked each side to confirm it again - there was no doubt, no place existed for that person to hide. They discarded the possibility of that person hiding in another office, they would've heard them enter shortly after hearing the knock on their door. Were they pulling their leg? Those insolent brats... Before closing the door in an even more abrupt way, they noticed the paper sheet on the floor beside the entrance to their office.

No, it wasn't a paper sheet, it was an envelope. They took it from the floor and quickly eyed the front and the back. There was no return address, nor addressee, just a beautiful wax seal with a hydrangea motif. They brushed that aside and used their right talon to break the envelope. They were swift to read the letter after having unfolded it, but its message was cryptic. It narrated the story of a person who was saved with only one coin. The author seemed to be the one who received such salvation. Sloppily written, it didn't go much into detail, and the handwriting was fast and ugly. Reading it was a great feat.

They doubted what the letter said was true. To be frank, they weren't sold on the idea that a person could be saved with just a singular coin. Having a rich benefactor who payed off their debts would be one thing, but a coin couldn't save anything on its own. Unless... it was a foreign coin and its value surpassed that of the sun¹? It

¹ * Suns are Galtorea's official currency. The sun is a very weak currency: as of right now (2025 (pre-recession)), 1 sun equals €0.00825, or 0.00854 USD.

would be a stretch, but it could be possible. Truth be told, they didn't understand the reason why they had received that letter. They contemplated the possibility of having opened someone else's mail, since the envelope had nothing written on it. The real addressee would've understood what the author was trying to explain, whoever they were. Since they lacked context, they could only speculate.

Their eyes parted from the letter to return to their office. When they turned around at the entrance, they were stunned. A red suit of armor had appeared close to their desk. The helmet was staring at them.

Vermillion woke up.

A headache made them hold their head. Having read so much had made them restless, and in turn made them dream about nonsense. They promised not to think about that kind of stuff before bed. Moonlight shone through the bars, several hours remained until Sir Vertigo would have its chat with them. However, they wanted to clear their mind before going back to bed. They made the most of the washbowl and pitcher on the restroom to clean themselves up. Cold water running down their body was enough to slow down their heartbeat and bring them back to the real world. Having dried themselves and changed into the spare clothes in the wardrobe, and of course their cape, they took one of the chairs to sit down. They crossed their hands behind their head and put their feet on the table.

They looked outside the window. It was difficult for them, but they could see some stars in the sky accompanying the moon. Aside from the sky, there was little else they could look at. They couldn't even see the ground, much less the horizon. Having gone down so many stairs, one would've thought they were underground, but it seemed like Sir Vertigo had done it again. How tall was the tower anyway? It didn't actually seem that tall from the outside, but...

An azure beam of light distracted them from their thoughts. It escaped from underneath the door to their room, going from left to right until disappearing. Vermillion grabbed the dagger from the table out of instinct and stepped closer to the entrance. Door ajar, they eyed the hallway - the sound of hinges without lubricant followed. There he was. Of course, they found Sir Vertigo at the end of the hallway, glimmering. He had stopped, facing away from Vermillion, but it didn't take long for him to take out a key and open one of the adjacent rooms. And just like that, it disappeared without a sound.

Were those its chambers? Did the magnificent Sir Vertigo live in a lowly guest room? No, it wasn't possible someone like it slept with the rest of the mortals. Surely he was just patrolling and nothing else, at the end of the day he was the only person who took care of the tower. Yes, just patrolling. Nothing to worry about. Vermillion could happily forget about it and go back to bed worry free.

But, damn, they wanted to know what he was scheming! Would it be a good idea to follow him? With their characteristic stealth it shouldn't be much of a problem,

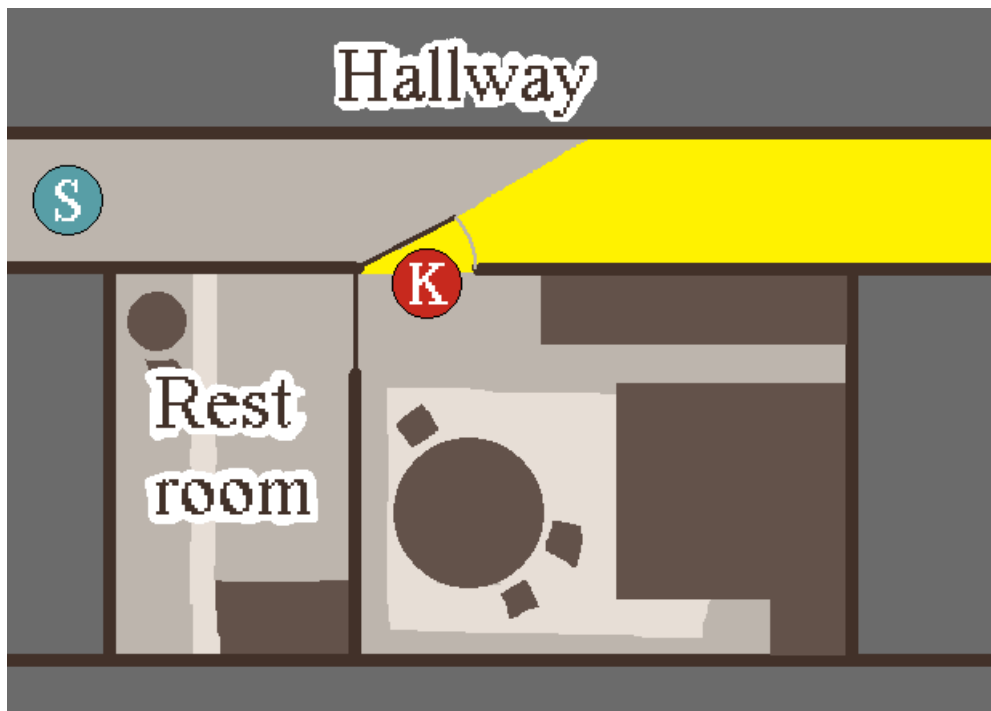
but they couldn't risk their luck. Their curiosity was quick to make them forget about having gotten out of bed in order to relax, not to strain their brain even further. They were certain that it was a trap to make them exit their room, and they could prove it.



On the one hand, there was the direction in which Sir Vertigo went. The light appeared from left to right, so he had to have gone in that same direction. Upon getting closer to the door, Vermillion used their left hand to open it halfway, and they had to push it. This meant the doorknob was on the right side of the door, and the hinges on the left.



They wouldn't have cared about Sir Vertigo's visit had they had to pull to open the door, or if the doorknob was on the other side, or even if he had gone from right to left! However, the sum of all of these factors made the possibility of Vermillion noticing him increase.



Had it crossed from left to right, it would've been harder for them to see it, since the door would've hindered their range of vision.



Had the doorknob been on the left, they wouldn't have seen much either thanks to the door.



And if the door was opened by pulling, the door would be the one who prevented Vermillion from seeing anything.

On the other hand, they had noticed Sir Vertigo's presence thanks to the light that shone under the door to their room. They knew he was able to regulate the level of brightness he emitted, so he deliberately magnified it in order to make Vermillion become aware of it and make them lean out the door to look.

Lastly, he had stayed put at the end of the hallway. To any other person, this would've been natural, since he was looking for a key to enter the last room. Vermillion, however, was convinced this was a plan to get them to see him. Be it as it may, having stayed at the end of that hallway for a while would guarantee that they would see him.

There was no doubt: that was the textbook definition of a trap. In any case, despite knowing that, they decided to leave the room slowly but surely and follow it. Inaudible steps reached the final door, and their talon grabbed the cold doorknob.

Friday afternoon. She was on time, but expected the worst. They were waiting for her.

"Dutchess!"

She thought of their enthusiastic voice as unnatural. She didn't reply.

"No 'hi' back or anything?" Vermillion held their head with their left hand, their elbow on the armrest.

"Please, let's just get this over with," she closed the door behind her and approached the desk.

At the beginning of their relationship, the amount problems she brought to solve was notorious, but with time that number decreased. This reduction, however, did not translate into a significant improvement each week. In fact, her difficulty following the subjects she was taking had not changed. What *had* changed was the impression she had of her teacher, from reasonable and a little strict to unbearable and demanding. There was no doubt neither of them wanted to be there, so Dutchess decided to do them both a favor by only bringing her most severe questions. She would deal with the rest herself, as best as she could.

Very little remained of her social life. It was already scarce by itself, but her studying problems made her stay more at home, which worsened her relationships with her friends. She frequently got burnt out from studying, and her friends in her close circle leaving her because they thought she wasn't spending enough time with them didn't help. To top it all off, she depended on Vermillion to at least stand a chance at learning anything, as low as that chance was. She didn't ask for much, either - as long as she passed her exams, she was happy.

While Vermillion and Dutchess worked, they did so without any interest in what the other had to say. Often times they didn't look at each other in the face. Any ill-timed remark was ignored and discarded from the conversation automatically, for it was not deserving of the attention of anybody between those four walls. This reality established itself as the weeks passed.

It was useless, bad luck kept following her. Just as she thought her luck would change, she realized she had been tied to a person she had made the mistake of idolizing.

When she opened her bag, some papers fell out of the notebook she took out. Vermillion went over to grab them, but she stopped them quickly, too quickly. In an instant, she stored them in the back of her notebook again - it seemed like she didn't like binders.

"What's the matter? Are you writing your first love letters? Or are you receiving them? It must be really embarrassing, right?" Vermillion intervened.

"Hah! Right, like anyone's ever gonna look at a face like mine."

"What are you talking about? You're so nice and hard-working, someone's bound to like you. Don't underestimate yourself like that!"

"Yeah, because only you are allowed to do that, right?" she looked at them empty-eyed.

"W-well... let's focus on your notes..."

After that forced start, her doubts were solved one by one with difficulty, as per usual. 'So that's why', 'of course', 'now I get it', 'I made things more complicated in my head' 'really?', 'I thought it was harder'.

The both of them knew nothing would change. Dutchess' grades didn't improve no matter how much she learned. Failing exams was the standard, passing them the exception. Neither of them liked to waste hours of their free time that way, but Vermillion was particularly irritated. They leaned back on their chair:

"This is a waste of time, don't you think?"

"Why? Because of how easy it is for you to solve them? You should feel proud, not everyone is as good when it comes to understanding things like these."

"No, what I'm trying to say is what we do here doesn't really matter, you know? You're gonna end up forgetting it all either during or after the exam, anyways."

"Excuse me?" Dutchess answered. "Hey, let me remind you this was your idea, not mine. The decision to help me out was completely yours, so I expect a little of responsibility on your part, at least. I mean, if I'm not getting any better, it means you're not doing your job correctly."

"What do you mean I'm not?! You exit this room with zero doubts, what you forget when you get home isn't my problem. Unbelievable! I can't be responsible for something I can't change!"

"But you can change it! I've already asked if you could change the evaluation method. I'm sure more than one student would also benefit from an essay instead of an exam"

Having heard the word 'essay' again, Vermillion's ears started ringing. That girl was stubborn, but it wasn't going to work. Truth be told, they didn't care about her excuses - it was clear her effort was not enough to meet academic standards. It was Vermillion's duty to look out for parity when it came to students getting examined. No matter how much she tried to trick them, she wasn't gonna convince them so easily. They were getting tired of her act, anyhow.

"If my teachings are so bad, then how about you attend another academy? Your little friends and you will be much better off without me, and I can say the exact same thing!" they shouted. Immediately after, they faced away from Dutchess to search between bookshelves and documents. "In fact, let me look at your file. I will make sure you're enrolled in a new school by Monday."

A cacophony of paper against paper. Hundreds of names and documents were reflected on their eyes. In a frenzy, they searched for her file. List of enrolled students... Dutchess joined in the year... Documents A, B, C... Dutchess' last name was... Her contact information was... That academy's inscription papers were...

Adrenaline running through their veins made them forget they were tied to the rest of the world. In that moment, Vermillion was the only person that existed, the only one they could truly count on. A single person universe. Many times had they experienced this state, unable to comprehend the context in which they existed. No, it wasn't that, but rather that they were able to create a universe in which only they could enter no matter the circumstances, no matter the context. They were able to create universes, absolute truths, without anyone's help - only their brain was enough. In the kingdom of consciousness, any opinion contrary to the foundation of the universe was discarded ipso facto. The barrier that they themselves had risen was sublime and wouldn't fall against just anybody. However, five words were enough to create a seam and bring them back to earth:

"Rouge wouldn't have allowed this."

"Don't you DARE speak of her again!!"

Before they realized it, they had smacked the table, sending several pages onto the floor. Despite having their gloves on, their fist felt hot against the wood - Dutchess' notebook almost didn't make it. She was able to see a part of Vermillion she had never seen. Those clear eyes wide open, pupils so small and thin like a cat's, a faint glow in the lower part of an irritated sclera. There was no need to make any further analysis to determine that was a look very few had taken out from them.

"It's true!" she insisted, "Ever since Rouge went away, you've become a monster! Everything has gone downhill since then! What, have you gone feral now that she can't grab you by the collar?"

"She was dangerous! She had to leave before she attacked--!"

"Compared to you, she was the most peaceful person in the world!!"

"You met her when she was just starting! God knows where she is now, probably up to no good! You have no idea how she really was!!" Vermillion's voice cracked.

"At least I know she was a better person than you!"

A better person? *Rouge*, a better person?! They couldn't believe it! They held their helmet with both hands, elbows on the table. Vermillion wanted to laugh. They

would have if it weren't for the frog in their throat. Every time they left their universe, the world was upside down. The basis of their reality clashed with the upside-down world's reality, always contradicting each other no matter what they did. They were always, *always* in the wrong. A small spot of black make-up appeared on one of the pieces of paper.

"Class is over. You can go home, Dutchess."

"See you next week, or...?"

"GET OUT!!"

Their pathetic yell contrasted with the speed at which they stood up from their seat. They suddenly grabbed Dutchess by the arm to take her to the exit - she almost fell off her broom. As they stabbed her arm with their talon she whimpered in pain, and elbowed their abdomen in hopes of getting released. Vermillion didn't budge.

The moment they had reached the door frame, they threw her into the hallway. Before slamming the office's door shut, they could see their student's pale face one last time.

Vermillion stood motionless for a few seconds, just to make sure Dutchess had enough time to leave on her own. After a while, they grasped their helmet again as if it were eating them from the inside. Frustration and anger made them punch any furniture item that entered their field of vision. Tens of documents and books were ripped apart, their grunts got interrupted thanks to their snot filled nose.

By the time they stopped screaming and turning their office into a huge mess, they had become exhausted. Sweat made their hair and clothes stick to their skin, their hands and feet were beat. Out of breath, they sat on the floor as best as they could and moved their knees close to their chest. They grasped their helmet again out of instinct; they couldn't handle their headache. More drops of make-up fell, this time they stained their skirt.

FIFTH SCENE

The azure chambers. THE FORTUNATE enters, dragging THE DAMNED with difficulty. Closes the door behind them both and sighs.

THE FORTUNATE: Who thought it was a good idea for me to take care of youuu?! Me, the ever so splendid last member of my lineage! Whose idea was iiiit?! Waaaaah!! (*Fakes crying*)

THE DAMNED doesn't reply despite the wails. THE FORTUNATE uncovers its face after a while to look at THE DAMNED.

THE FORTUNATE: (*Stops crying*) Hey, I know you're in there, you know? You don't have to hide - I don't mind that you don't wanna do anything, but at least stop pretending like you're sleeping, it's really annoying. You should make an effort and talk to the rest about what's on your mind instead of spying on us, got it?

THE FORTUNATE shakes THE DAMNED in an useless attempt to capture THE DAMNED's attention. Seeing that it doesn't work, THE FORTUNATE walks around the room.

THE FORTUNATE: Are you listening to me? It's not funny. Stop it, you're starting to scare me! Seriously, why is everyone here so irresponsible? Why do they leave me alone in here with no one else?! It's because they want me to be in charge of the plan all by myself, isn't it? Are those two doing so bad they need me, the least expert of the group, to take control of the operation?! That useless monk and his stuck-up bodyguard... damn you!! If it weren't because that armored scumbag failed in that mission, I wouldn't have had to leave that present in the last room. Why does nobody understand this isn't a job suitable for meeeee?! I will destroy them! I will pull out all parts of their bodies, and I'll start with their eyelashes!! Then, the eyelids, the alae of the nose, the lips, the earlobes, the nails and toenails, every hair on their body! Then, I will cook them at low temperature so their flesh is no longer bound to their bones, and after that I will peel them like an apple with the biggest of care! While their hearts are still beating, I will make sure to tear off their eyes, their teeth, their brains, their entrails and their tongue to blend them and make a delicious sauce with some water and flour. As a final touch, I will showcase their naked bodies with a side of sautéed vegetables and I will accompany that exquisite sauce with some sweet layers of pear compote while their blood still emanates from their bodies! Then they will be able to understand my sacrifice, their place in the food chain!!

THE FORTUNATE halts in the middle of the room, facing away from THE DAMNED.

THE FORTUNATE: And, despite my grievances, you're without a doubt the most competent of them all. You're supposed to come back when you're needed, right? *(Turns to THE DAMNED)* So what are you waiting for? I will be able to overcome my fear of you if you take the reins of the situation and free me. Please understand, I really don't want to go through this, so do me a favor, will you? That tantrum from earlier was just a joke, I promise!

THE FORTUNATE kneels at the height of THE DAMNED, who's still on the floor.

THE FORTUNATE: What? Do you want an apology? Fine. I'm sorry I called your acting skills awful. There you have it! Are you gonna come back now? Please? ...You're hard to cater to, huh? That's also what's unique about you. I know you're fearsome, but you too seek to protect the star knight, am I correct? Whenever you appear, you bring a stability no other can give. The moment you're in control of the situation, everything seems to resolve itself much more efficiently compared to those other too, or even myself. I must thank you for that. And... I'm also sorry for not realizing it sooner. I appreciate what you do for us. If you don't come back, it's because you think your presence isn't necessary - that I understand, but you don't even know how hard it is without you guiding us... Are you mad at me? Is that why you don't wanna come back? I'm sorry, alright? Forgive me, won't you? Why can't I change your mind and make you come back? This is so unfair, y'know? I don't know what else to do. What are you waiting for? Come back! Who in their right mind would leave a child all alone? *(Grabs THE DAMNED by the collar)* You're so cruel! Why must I always be alone?! I just wanna enjoy my childhood, I'm not built for this life!! *(Genuinely sobs)* Tell me, what have I done to deserve this?! I can hear your ridiculous laugh from here, you know?! Yes... despite your mouth not making a sound, your guffaw reaches my ears clearly! I shall grace you with my truth: it's not funny at all! I will silence you! I will silence you all!! You'll regret tarnishing my glory!! Aaaaaaaaarrrgghh!!!

THE VOICE OF THE DAMNED: Goodnight.

THE DAMNED raises a single finger, and THE FORTUNATE goes out of breath before THE FORTUNATE can cause any harm. THE FORTUNATE clings to its ruffled collar in a useless attempt at lessening neck pressure. THE FORTUNATE ends up on the floor beside THE DAMNED, agonizing, drowsy.

THE FORTUNATE: *(With difficulty)* That's... it...! There it is...!! That cranky... old-timer... I've missed... so much...! *(Out of breath)* I beg... of... you... Come back... to... us..., you... sly... dog...

THE FORTUNATE loses consciousness.

Upon entering, a familiar visage: the library again. A quick glance made Vermillion aware of the mess they had made the day prior. Had he come back to clean it? It was plausible, but there were no signs of Sir Vertigo anywhere.

In fact, the only thing that got their attention was a single book that stood on one of the tables. Compared to its companions, which had been thrown to the floor carelessly, it was clear that it had to have been put that way intentionally. Upon closer inspection they could tell it was a volume of a children's book collection, which usually taught some sort of moral. They took it and skimmed through the illustration filled pages. The story followed the misadventures of a masker that could not keep a promise and succumbed to despair.

What was he trying to say with that book? If only he were there to ask him... They decided to look for others of that same series. They didn't take long to find more, but for some reason the one he chose was different from the rest. Ah, Vermillion remembered, they heard it previously on the occasional meeting. As it turned out, it was a very acclaimed collection for kids and parents alike: it gave kids the possibility to live adventures entirely different to those other books offered, with huge risks and a lot of conflict, but with the certainty that the protagonist would win. But in that volume in particular the protagonist was not victorious, and that scared the kids so much the next books were toned down so the parents would keep buying them. In the end, the same kids who were enamored by the Prestigious Masker would end up getting tired of that new version, they saw it as infantile and boring.

Seriously, what a bunch of wimps, they thought. First, they couldn't handle one singular story with big conflict, and then they complained of the series not having enough conflict. Can't good books be written anymore?! It was all the new generations' fault; they were too weak and easily frightened. At that age, they were reading a manual on how to create their own weapons. Of course, parents would also be incompetent cretins as well, those kids should thank them for not getting hit every time they complained about words in a book. Had they been the one who complained...

Entertaining that thought was useless, it would only bring them a headache. They decided to leave it be before they got angrier. Having turned around and crossed through the entrance once more, they got into a room different than the hallway. Some spacious bedchambers filled with banners. Stained glass windows let the little light the night offered inside, the bed was unmade. Vermillion had never seen a full-length mirror before, so they got taken aback when they saw their complete reflection. In front of said mirror was a desk with several books carefully piled up. There were only two in the middle of the desk: one open, and the other closed and secured with a leather case. Quill and blue ink bottle rested beside the encased

book, probably a record of sorts. They took the already opened book and looked at its cover: it seemed to be a compilation of all knowledge regarding different and unusual automated mechanisms. They never imagined a book like that would be in the tower, much less in a bedroom.

Furthermore, they didn't know Vertigo liked mechanics so much. Because... the bedroom was its, right? It had to be, he said there was nobody else in the tower until they came... Thinking about that barren place being the home of people just like him felt weird to them. They remembered the portrait on the hallway and wondered if they had had as much fun as Vertigo led to believe. Only on occasion had Vermillion felt like they were part of a group, so it was hard for them to imagine coworkers becoming more than just that.

They once decided to give going out with fellow professors a chance to celebrate the beginning of summer. To say that it was the best night of their life would be an understatement. Even so, their demeanor worsened when they arrived home. They started to think those people, who would probably describe them as a friend, were insignificant, and they had no clue *why*. They couldn't understand where that hatred came from - they were just talking to them mere minutes prior. Something inside them was telling them they had wasted their time with fools such as those. Their head hurt like never before. No, it would be wise to leave that story be before the headache returned.

From where the book was opened, it gave the impression that Vertigo was about to finish it. Vermillion returned it to its place and inspected the one with the leather case. They only looked at the first page in order to not intrude in the privacy of the writer, and there was his handwriting. A gentle hand had been writing daily entries, which were grouped in years. Most were the same entry over and over but in different dates. That black cursive was akin to a decoration on the ochre paper, seeing everything so neat and organized was satisfying.

However, melancholy washed over them as they read that page. They had already seen more than one of his pages, but, for some reason, they felt like they were missing something. Attacked by *déjà-vu*, they attempted to remember where had they seen that handwriting before, aside from the tower... No, what they were searching for was something different. A completely different handwriting, but the same format. A similar way of expressing oneself, but not identical. The same margins at each side, the same space between lines. The same trouble to keep the book open. They turned the book to look at it from the top - the last set of pages had been ripped off.

Vermillion bit their lip. They opened the first page again and looked at it in great detail. They pressed their thumb against the side of the book's pages to skim through it. With that movement, they had no chance at reading what it had written, but they didn't care. The content wasn't important, anyways. Right after that, they looked at the ink bottle. Vermillion hesitated.

The colors didn't match. It wasn't exactly the difference they were looking for, but they couldn't overlook it now that they had noticed. Come to think of it, the ink bottle on their room's drawer also had blue ink. Then, how come the text was in black? They searched through the desk's drawers until they found one filled to the brim with ink bottles. Each one had a different colored liquid than the rest, and all of them showed signs of being used.

Why did he need so many colors? Was he an artist? Was the knights' portrait its doing? No, ink and paint were entirely different mediums, the probability of both being the same person was scarce - besides, they found no brush to use the ink with, just the quill on the desk.

It was when they stopped examining the red ink bottle when they realized the drawer hid something else. Underneath the ink bottles, there was a smooth, dark surface. They took the bottles out, careful not to break the glass and stain the room with ink, to reach for that object. Another notebook, this one old and worn out, a good friend of the dust residing in the now empty drawer. It had no special protection, it just looked like it would vanish just by blowing it away. Colorful spots stained the cover.

SIXTH SCENE

CANNON FODDER's bedchambers. THE VULTURE searches through the drawers of a desk until they find an old notebook.

THE RIGHTEOUS enters.

THE RIGHTEOUS: *(Separately)* Poor creature, how apparent that sickness of theirs is... You gave me quite the scare when you reacted to my image, even if your reaction lasted just a wink. It's that same sickness that brought you into our territory, isn't it? I understand you. Believe me, there's little one can do against it. It's a shame, but I urge you to understand my reasoning - if not now, I invite you to seek my motives in the future. No one is ready to know what those pages hide, and no one will ever be, of that I have no doubts. This is for your own good. Forgive me. *(Snaps fingers)*

The ground underneath THE VULTURE opens and they fall before they can open the notebook. THE RIGHTEOUS uses the right hand to grab it midair, puts it back in its place with regret.

THE RIGHTEOUS: *(Sighs)* I know you're in there. Come out, now.

THE MONK enters.

THE MONK: A wise decision, friend. Thy act fills me with pride, being witness of thy feat has been an honor.

THE RIGHTEOUS: I wish it hadn't come to this.

THE MONK: It is inevitable, I fear, for showing them this here text despite the doubt in their heart would be unwise of us. It would only make matters even worse, and I believe we have sacrificed more than enough to dig our own graves.

THE RIGHTEOUS: But there's no issue in digging theirs, eh?

THE MONK: What difference is there for a mortal between a grave and destiny? Can thou not see this here be our chance? I promise thee, this shall all be worth it once it has been done. In any case, what is the matter with thee as of late? Hath thou attempted to contact them in any which way?

THE RIGHTEOUS: *(Lying)* No.

THE MONK: Allow me to remind thee that, should thou want to make any advances, thou shall communicate them with the rest, am I clear? Of course, I

believe thee, but my only wish is to remind thee, should the moment arrive. Very well then, we must keep going forward, now. Few hours remain until dawn, and no more distractions art necessary. Tempus fugit - we art on borrowed time, after all.

THE RIGHTEOUS: Do you think they would be able to understand it? (*THE MONK stays silent*) Understand our situation? Us?

THE MONK: ...Well, simply put, that is none of their concern. They have no need to know, they art naught but a tool to us anyways. What difference would it make? They ought to mind their own business, no? Thou should abandon that thought, otherwise it might tamper with our plan directly. And thou doth not want that, correct? Because thou seek the same as the rest, correeect? Thou art willing to use any kind of tool in order to achieve our objective, correeeeect?

THE RIGHTEOUS: Don't get me wrong. I want to achieve the objective more than anyone, but... I can't help it, only looking at them I can tell they're scared. If only...

THE MONK: Doth mine own ears deceive me? Is that remorse I hear? I am most glad there is still goodness in thy heart after all, yet this is not the time to show it. Hear this, I understand thy feelings, but I promise thee this plan was made by taking the greater good into account. Remember what makes this visitor special, that which the previous guest did not have. Doth thou remember the guest from three months ago?

THE RIGHTEOUS: Yes, that poor man was disheveled... That's why several rations were given to him. But that man left this place without complications!

THE MONK: That is because we had no use for that man! Try to remember, the composition of his person! What differentiates him from our current guest is more than his soul.

THE RIGHTEOUS: That may be true, but... they don't deserve it. They don't deserve what's coming their way. If only I had never known about the trap.

THE MONK: (*Puts a hand on THE RIGHTEOUS' shoulder*) Prithee, do not be like that. Thou art safe, there is naught for thee to worry about.

THE RIGHTEOUS: (*Soft*) Monk... How long have we known each other for? Twenty years? Thirty? (*Holds THE MONK's wrist and tilts head*) Ever since I reached the use of reason, you've always been by my side. I value your friendship as if it were a sacred prize, I wouldn't let go of it no matter what. You're one of the most unmovable pillars of my being. That's why it breaks my heart to become a part of this. It's not too late for you to change your ways, so I only beg of you to reconsider wisely. I know you, and I know you can do it. Until then, I'm afraid I must abstain from any act regarding the plan. To open the floor and let our guest of Honor fall was not for the sake of the objective, but for the sake of protecting ourselves. Starting today, every single act I do will also aim to protect ourselves -

whether you think of them as such or not is your problem. I cannot keep tricking them like this. The least I can offer them is protection from the plan, from ourselves.

THE MONK: (*Also soft*) ...If thy words art true, thou art free to leave and not worry. It saddens me to know we cannot rely on thee anymore, but I shan't be an obstacle in thy mission. I believe that, despite our methods differing, in essence, we seek the same finality. It shall happen sooner or later, be it thanks to this here guest or a future one. I wish for thee nothing but the best of luck in thy endeavors in your absence. I await thy return, for this weak heart of mine shall always be thine.

THE RIGHTEOUS: This old bag of bones is also yours, my friend. Until we meet again.

THE RIGHTEOUS leaves.

THE MONK: (*Separately, looking at the hole on the floor*) Von Kavalier... thou art turning out to be a worrisome individual. It matters not, for a challenge like this only makes our duty become something far more interesting.

A loud thud against cold, stone tiles indicated that their fall had ended. Vermillion was starting to get tired of getting thrown off of high places - at that rate, they would make a dent on the ground. In an attempt to ignore the pain, they got up from the floor and absorbed their newest surroundings.

A long hallway lay upon them, similar to the one with the room that had the lit chimney. The only notable difference was that there was a big portal in the west wall of the hallway, which was given away by the moonlight coming through and hitting the door in front of it. A balcony, perhaps? They couldn't know from where they stood. Trying to open the doors on the opposite wall would be useless, they figured, since Sir Vertigo didn't seem to like leaving doors unlocked for no reason. They decided to get closer to the light and look towards the portal. Their guess was correct!

As they approached the platform, they were engulfed by the view. Having every single torch in the tower unlit meant being able to see all the stars glimmer in the dark sky, its shimmer only obfuscated by the dim lights in the nearby valley's villages. A gust of fresh air penetrated their lungs and made their cape fly with the wind. They couldn't find the moon, but figured at that time of the day it would be hidden behind the tower. A glance towards the top of the tower showed no signs of the satellite coming to the other side. Bummer.

That's when it hit them. It didn't make sense at all. Where was the moonlight that lured them into the balcony in the first place if the moon was nowhere to be seen? They wanted to entertain that idea until they reached a satisfactory conclusion, but there was something else that got their attention. On the ground below the balcony, stalagmites. Actual, real stalagmites. Not thorns or wooden spikes, but *stalagmites*. Right in the middle of a *grass field*. Surely, stalactites wouldn't have formed right underneath the balcony, just hanging under there right? There was no way, the tower wasn't old enough to be able to form them, or humid enough for that matter. The smell of pollen was so thick it tickled.

Just as they were trying to make sense of an object stuck in one of the stalagmites, moonlight shone on their back. Yet they saw no moon when they turned around.

"Art thou enjoying the view?" Sir Vertigo's calm demeanor accompanied its radiant presence. "Ah, hath mine own gleam startled thee? Apologies."

Of course. They should've seen it coming. That would explain the vanishing moonlight.

"No worries," they replied, relaxing their shoulders. "And yeah, it's pretty. You're lucky! Where I come from, the sky never gets to look like this."

"I am most pleased to hear that thou fancy it! We must agree with thee. What I would give to experience this nighttime visage for the very first time." Vermillion's gaze went back to the starry sky while he inched closer to the stone railing. "Impatient, art we not? Could thy curiosity not wait until sunrise?"

"To be fair, I *did* try to sleep, but I couldn't help but stay up. Nightmares, horrible stuff!" Vermillion bit their cheek. "I thought a light walk might help clear my thoughts."

"But of course, it is only natural. Feel free to roam wherever thou please. Verily, it is a shame - I was planning to be thy guide, had been jotting down some routes to walk thou across so the guest of Honor could familiarize themselves with this here most great Tower. It was our wish to wait until sunrise to discuss these matters with thee, so that the journey was ready. I doth feel the need to apologize, for our quest was for naught, given the little time that was available to us."

"Whuh? Oh, don't worry about me! I'm just watching the scenery! With all the time you've spent here, I'm sure you'll be able to come up with a tour eventually!"

They didn't really know what to expect from that conversation, they were trying their hardest to accept its words at face value. Was Sir Vertigo actually attempting to be a good host for them? It sure felt like it, but Vermillion wasn't completely sold on the idea. Not yet. In that moment, the only thing they could do was showing respect and seeing how their host-guest relationship unfolded.

"It may not seem like it, but it sure is a ton of work, I might say. It would have taken us less time to prepare the itinerary had we had the help of our former colleagues to take care of the Tower for us. Truly, a knight must devote himself to the craft of restoration and preservation."

The image of the painting resurfaced in Vermillion's mind.

"Does it not feel lonely? Being the only one in here for so long?"

"Ah, well... I don't really have much time to worry about that. The Tower's sanctity comes first, not the other way around. Such is the life we chose to live."

"You don't really have to commit yourself to your work anymore, y'know? I mean, you're dead and all."

"Nonsense! It is our duty, I devoted myself to this very task. To ignore it is to simply spit on the foundations of that of which we were taught."

"I don't mean just leaving your job unattended, just... Relax? Go outside for a little bit? Go on a walk?"

"No."

The stubbornness in his voice caught them off guard. So straightforward, so committed to the cause... and for what?

"Dude, it's fine if you leave the tower be for five seconds and focus on having fun every once in a while." they almost begged him.

"You're one to talk. My rank does not grant me the privilege of leisure."

"Didn't they at least offer you vacation days??"

"I'm proud to say I didn't take any!"

His reasoning bordered on stupidity. There was nothing left to defend, no enemies to battle. Vermillion had no way of telling if his daily routine was carried out out of habit or genuine interest. Nevertheless, the years of work had to have worn him down eventually. If he *was* burnt out, he was good at hiding it.

"Well, what about the free time you're losing? Like... like when you were a kid! Don't you miss playing around and not having any responsibilities to your name?"

Right as they finished asking, Sir Vertigo felt the nonexistent air sucked out of his lungs in an instant.

"I don't..." His words trailed off, not knowing how to properly answer. After some thought, it sighed, defeated. "I don't really remember being a kid... so no, I don't miss it."

"Ah... Yeah, happens to me too sometimes. I barely have any memories from when I was a toddler, haha."

Vermillion had hoped in good faith that their words would've mended their companion's saddened expression. However, their funny little remark fell flat as the distance between them widened.

"...N-no, you don't understand. I can't remember... anything... My memories start roughly at age fifteen."

Something twisted within Vermillion. They instantly felt sickened, even regretted having thought of bringing that topic up. Still, there was a hint of familiarity in those words. Where had they heard that before?

"I... I didn't know that..."

"No, it's fine, really. I don't really have... anything to remember, so... it's alright. I don't feel like I've lost anything, in a way..."

The chilling wind blew once more in that tiny balcony. Vermillion grasped the ends of their cape, with their arms crossed over the railing. Sir Vertigo looked at the sky again. Their worlds were light years apart, despite being centimeters away from each other. A sting in Vermillion's nose made them shudder.

"It's getting late, I should go." And just then, another sting. This time on their head. "See you tomorrow."

They took the nod that followed as their cue to leave. There was no reason to stay, anyway - they figured it would just make things uncomfortable.

They honestly didn't know what to think of his sudden confession. It certainly was a ton of information to unpack, but Vermillion felt as though they shouldn't have been at the other end of the receiver. What was it trying to accomplish with that? Was it attempting to make them lower their guard so they could strengthen their trust in him? Or perhaps he only wanted them to stay so he could let off some steam?

As much as they wanted to, they frankly couldn't care less. Everyone's got issues, and they already had their own to worry about. Still, their inability to reassure others was something they weren't proud of. They wanted to change, but... To be fair, they had just met him, they didn't want to be nosy. *But...*

They had to try. They wouldn't forgive themselves if they missed the opportunity. Just as they crossed the portal to the hallway, they begrudgingly gulped.

"S-should you need anything..."

"That's funny. I should be the one saying that," he scoffed.

"Well, it's your issue, then! Goodbye!!" They jokingly stormed off into the hallway as they heard Sir Vertigo laugh behind them. They imagined that, if they made themselves the butt of the joke by pretending to be mad, it would create enough contrast with their sincere act to make it laugh. What they didn't expect was how contagious its laugh was. It was most likely the first time in years someone made it laugh that much. And then, another sting.

"I didn't mean it like that!" Both of their chuckles died out. "It's just... It's kind of difficult to explain."

"What is?"

As Vermillion turned around to see him again, he was still giving them his back, looking at the horizon. Its blue glow dimmed the stars' to the point of becoming akin to dust particles. His robes swayed the slightest bit with the wind as he shook his head.

"I'm trying to find the words, but I can't. Seems like the gift of the gab isn't on my side today."

"I mean, look at the bright side. You got all the time in the world to find yourself."

"I suppose... but that doesn't ease my mind. Waiting for a tomorrow that never comes is no different than waiting for a thousand years."

Vermillion bit their lip.

"...At least you have a tomorrow to look up to." The wind stopped.

"What makes you say that?"

His gaze returned to Vermillion. They both locked eyes for what it seemed like an eternity. And then, another sting

"There are some things I can never redeem myself from." The pressure was too much, they broke eye contact first. They eyed their left hand instead.

"I'm sure--"

Before it could finish its sentence, the portal was closed with a wall of stone coming from the ceiling.

"Hey! What gives?!" Vermillion approached the new wall.

"I-I didn't do this!! Are you alright? Did you get hurt?!" Sir Vertigo's muffled voice almost didn't reach their ears. "I can't get through, I don't know what's happening. Hang tight."

"I--"

A quick rumble was not enough to warn them of what would come next. The wall swiftly got closer to Vermillion - there was little they could do to react in time. Before they got crushed, the door behind them opened, and by the time the wall hit them they were pushed into the room inside. They fell onto the paper-covered floor.

"Are still you there?! Did I open that door in time?" His voice was louder this time.

"I'm alive...", they whimpered.

"Oh, thank goodness! I didn't know if that would work. I can't move any other wall, but don't worry, I'll find a way to get you out."

"Yeah, I wouldn't wanna run out of air."

They hurriedly stood up again as he tried to seek a way out in desperation. The wall didn't seem to budge at any attempt Sir Vertigo made, or at least that's what they thought. They couldn't really see what he was up to, so there was no certainty that he was helping. But they could hear him mumbling to himself through the wall. After a while, he spoke clearly:

"Okay, I think I know what to do. Don't panic, I'll be back!"

The silence that followed was proof of him going away. Well, they could only wait until he came back. The room didn't have any other window or wall from which to escape, so they decided to investigate it to kill some time.

Upon first sight, it gave them the impression that it was an office, but the amount of bookshelves, books and papers scattered around made them think otherwise. The archive was covered in dust, but it didn't seem like it was unkempt. Oil lamps on the walls illuminated it with their subtle light, they could also be useful to dispose of unnecessary documents, they thought. Despite being a large room, the sum of all the furniture spread around would've made more than one person anxious given the very little free space that remained.

They got closer to the first cabinet that grabbed their attention and began searching. All of the drawers were filled with folders, papers and logs, organized in a system they weren't able to understand. They took one of the logs out - it had a watermark on the cover, the crest of a flying bird with a snake's tail. Upon opening it, they realized it contained a description of every single treasure in the tower and where to find them. Enchanted swords, statues, magical artifacts, brooms, dresses, suits of armor, manuscripts, works of art... Eureka! They were going to have a great time finding them! The indications weren't gonna help them, since the rooms would change order, but it was a good resource nonetheless. They decided they wanted to continue reading it later on, so they stored the log in their hair and went on to investigate something else.

When they opened another drawer, they took out a different folder. They soon realized it was a register of every single knight that resided in the tower, classified by date of entry. Flipping through the pages made them able to see different faces drawn in watercolor - some drawings were more flattering than others. Curiosity took over them as they searched for a specific page, and after some minutes they found it. Verdi Spinto! Seeing his portrait was funny, they didn't know why. He looked just like in the portrait of the hallway - Vermillion hadn't realized the both of them were the same person. And that hair! They imagined it would be a different color, but he looked good as a brunette. They also quickly adapted to its tan skin and brown eyes. What shook them the most was seeing it without the scars on its head and face. It was like looking at a different person. Aside from that, they realized every single knight was horned. Was it a prerequisite? They didn't think much of it and put the folder back in its place.

They opened the next drawer, filled to the brim with folders, separated by each letter of the alphabet. Vermillion skimmed through them with their talon in an attempt to find anything interesting. In the end, they were just documents about regular people, the separators indicated the first letter of their surname. In actuality, they weren't the biggest fan of seeing the lives of so many people plastered into a single sheet of paper, but they couldn't think of another way to do it either. Once they had grown tired of inspecting names and portraits, they opened another drawer, but this one only had two sections: 'A' and 'D'. How odd, shouldn't sections 'B' and 'C' have resided between those two? A quick look on the documents classified as D showed the people in that drawer didn't have a surname that started with that consonant. Then, why were they there? Maybe the surname wasn't what separated those people.

They took out several D folders and looked through them. They were all regular people. None of them knew each other, they didn't even live in the same place. Their ages were also different. No name or surname was similar to the rest. None of those people's appearance was similar. Ones wore glasses, others shirts, others jumpers, others jackets, others had their hair on a ponytail, others didn't, others wore earrings, others had a mustache, others were bald. They all had horns. But that shouldn't have been important - the people in the other drawer also had them and they were organized alphabetically. No common wounds, no common fractures, no common scars. Not even their birth dates had anything to do with each other. What exactly categorized them into D and not A?

Wait a second. Their... birth dates had nothing to do with each other? Yes, it was true, but there was something else. They didn't only had anything to do with each other, but they also didn't match with their described ages. It was impossible for a person who was born fifty years ago to be twenty-three. So that must've been it, they surely skipped their decease dates. That's what they had in common. That's what D meant. Then, if that's what section D meant, section A's meaning was obvious. They returned the folders into their section and started looking through those in section A.

They moved folder after folder, looking at unimportant names. But one of them made them stop searching. They carefully took out the folder that contained said name. They doubted on opening the document or leaving it be and pretending like nothing had happened. After weighing the possibilities, they ended up giving in and looking at its contents. They didn't even have to look at the surname to know who it was. Just the name was enough: Blanca. A portrait of a seven or eight year-old girl. Her left hand was covered in bandages. Her birth date was correct. It was written that she was born with dark hair, but by the time she was four it had turned completely white. Shortly after having recovered from her hand's wounds, she had been in an altercation that resulted in visible damage to her head. It also said that, some years after her portrait was made, she would disappear, never to be seen

again. They declared her absence over twenty years ago, but her parents still were still looking for her. However, according to her parents' testimony, they didn't know anybody who could've kidnapped her or had any problems with the family in order to cause them so much pain.

Vermillion grasped the paper with fury. Their heart rate was rising. They didn't find her? They didn't find her?! Argghhh, fuck!! Why? If they didn't find her, why in the world was she in A and not D?! *Why was she not in D?!* It had been twenty years!! *Twenty years!!* What type of brain damage made them think they would find her after *twenty damn years?!* Was it because she didn't leave a trace? Was that why they wanted to keep looking?! *Idiots!* Those fools would never be able to find her in a million years!! And it was all their fault. Why did they have to hide the body so well? They fell to the floor on their knees.

Just thinking about that document not only existing, but being within reach of anybody who worked at the tower gave them a headache. It could've even been read by... no. No, no, no, it couldn't be. Was that why Sir Vertigo treated them like scum on their first day in the tower? That had to be it.

He knew. He knew what they were and what they had done. They couldn't handle thinking about anyone else knowing. They remembered the lack of windows the moment they realized they were hyperventilating. They started to question if they could exhaust all the air in the room and asphyxiate right there and then, either that or confront Sir Vertigo and make it decapitate them for what they did. Both options seemed more merciful to them than to let themselves be saved. They couldn't allow themselves to live knowing someone else had found out about one of their worse secrets. They wanted to drink until they ended their life. To die of hunger. Of decapitation, poisoning, exsanguination, drowning, crushing, falling, calcination, sudden death. The method didn't matter, as long as it made them reach their final destination. If they couldn't amend their mistakes in that life, maybe it was time they let the rest of the world spin.

"Are you still there?!" a voice on the other side of the wall brought them back to reality.

Sir Vertigo was back. Despite what they had done, it wanted to save them. It wanted to have them as a visitor. Maybe he was pretending not to know anything so Vermillion wouldn't be alarmed. A nice movement. They quickly decided to do the same. They didn't want to face the revelation, so the more they could postpone it the better. They left Blanca's file inside section D and closed the drawer.

"Took you long enough!" their attempt at regaining their composure was eclipsed by their agitated voice.

"Sorry for taking so long, I did it as fast as I could!" it seemed like he didn't catch the change of tone. "I can get you out now, one second."

When he warned them, the wall disappeared into the ceiling and the two of them found each other face to face. Vermillion studied him, he seemed worried about what could've happened inside the archive. Which meant they were right. They had to pretend.

"Are you alright?" he asked them.

"Yes. I'm feeling better."

"Really? You're shaking." He got closer to give Vermillion his hand, but they rejected it. When they got up from the ground they could tell it was right.

"I am, I am! It's just... I... get uneasy in small rooms. But it's over now."

It was obvious it wasn't over. Their eyes were gone, their fists were balled and their back was painfully straight. Their chest rose and fell rapidly. Their way of responding to his questions didn't support their alibi.

"Are you sure? Do you need me to--?"

"Sir Vertigo. I'm. Fine."

After having heard its name, something inside it made it stop insisting. Neither of them knew what to do. Vertigo's right hand was still in the air, ready to catch Vermillion should they faint. But they never did.

"Alright."

And so, they left.

SEVENTH SCENE

CANNON FODDER exits the stage, THE VULTURE is still on the hallway looking back into the archive. THE FORTUNATE, THE DAMNED and THE MONK appear inside but are seen by nobody.

THE FORTUNATE: (*To THE DAMNED's limp body*) Why didn't you deliver the coup de grâce? Do you even listen to me when I'm talking to you?! You worthless scum!! You always leave us alone, it's not fair!

THE MONK: Young master!! What kind of manners art those?! Apologize right away.

THE FORTUNATE: (*Sticks tongue out*) No way! Neither of you are my superiors, old fart. If it wasn't because you amuse me I would've already gotten rid of you.

THE MONK: Old fart?! What be the meaning of this? I-I still doth not possess white hair!

THE FORTUNATE: Wow! Doesn't really seem like it! Anyways, I don't wanna get mad at you, so mind your business, will you? Instead cry about not being able to crush our dear guest.

THE MONK: Preposterous! How dare--? Hold on. Thou were not the one who created the archive's closed room using the wall of stone?

THE FORTUNATE: I would've liked to, but *someone* didn't let me do anything because of a stupid nap. No wonder it wasn't you, since you're so incompetent.

THE MONK: But then, who...?

THE VOICE OF THE RIGHTEOUS: It was I. (*THE RIGHTEOUS enters the stage. Stays by the entrance of the archive, just beside THE VULTURE*) I was the one who made the wall fall and trapped them in the archive. It did a good job by attracting them to the portal, it gave us time to plan the ambush - but we can't afford to end their life just yet, correct? After all, we have a plan to take into action.

THE MONK: (*Runs happily to the door*) I knew it! I knew thou would listen to reason and come back to us! Thou cannot comprehend how much joy thy return brings!

THE RIGHTEOUS: My friend... your words touched my heart, and after a brief pause for reflection I have accepted what I know is true. I'm willing to give it my all if it means the accomplishment of our common objective. It must've been hard

for you and the rest to come to terms with my absence, and for that I am sorry. In the end, I ended up upsetting you for nothing.

THE MONK: It matters not! For thy return is most important as of right now. Thou made the correct decision, and also the wisest, if I may be so bold. To receive thy presence once more has been an honor! We welcome thee anew.

THE FORTUNATE: (*Still on the other side of the archive*) Are you done? Hate to break your special moment or whatever, but we have more important things to do, don't you think? Oh, and well done, I suppose.

THE RIGHTEOUS: Thank you. I chose the archive because, given the circumstances, I was convinced our guest would find something of value.

THE FORTUNATE: Ah, so bringing them to the archive was your doing also? Why didn't you say so? Had I known you were so good at decision making, I would've entrusted you to deal with our guest.

THE MONK: Young master, thou art still young and inexperienced. This next remark be in no way ill-intended, yet I do not believe thou would have been able to come up with anything of the sort.

THE FORTUNATE: I'm sure I would've come up with anything much better than you would've in a million years! If it wasn't because I lost consciousness, I'm certain my beautiful and privileged mind would've made an excellent closed room. And then you would kneel before me and accept me as your legitimate superior.

THE RIGHTEOUS: The four of us are the same rank.

THE FORTUNATE: Shut up! Don't make me retract my verdict! Be thankful! Oh well, shall we get going? I want a glass of warm milk before bedtime.

THE FORTUNATE prepares to exit, THE RIGHTEOUS pretends to take THE DAMNED's body, but THE MONK grabs it instead. The four of them leave the room, but only THE RIGHTEOUS stays onstage, alongside THE VULTURE. While the rest leave the hallway, THE RIGHTEOUS gets closer to THE VULTURE and lays a hand on their shoulder.

THE RIGHTEOUS: Vermillion. I know you can't see or hear me in this state, but I wish my message reaches you, so I have no other choice but to talk. You don't know me, but I would be lying if I said we haven't met before, so please, if you're somehow listening, do me a favor and pay attention to me. I need you to understand that trapping you inside the archive and forcing you to look at the thing you wanted to avoid was something I did to protect you. I have no idea what's in that document, but I don't need to know either. I can perfectly tell this is something you want to forget, so I won't judge you if you do not wish to reveal its contents. The pain I have caused you was only a fraction of the cruelty you're able to suffer. You're lucky one of us is on your side, my companions are not so merciful. If it weren't

because I convinced them and because they don't distrust me, the pain you've been through would've felt like a millionth of the pain they would've inflicted on you. I'm sorry for hurting you, but I hope you understand the reason behind my actions. Why I couldn't let them play with your innards. From this point on, be very careful. I will do everything within my reach to help you, but even my powers have a limit. Furthermore, my companions are incredibly clever, so they won't take long to notice what I'm doing for you. If I could provide for you all the time in the world I would, but still, do not misuse the little time I give you. Your first mistake was to come to this Tower. Do not fall for its lies. The only thing that awaits you here is distress and treason. I know I can't change your mind just like that, so I won't force you to - the only thing I ask of you is to listen what I'm about to say very carefully: Please, promise me that, once you achieve your objective, you will leave this Tower and never return. That is my only wish. I've seen far too many souls be consumed by the Tower, and I don't need any more victims. I beg of you, flee! I can't see you fall! My biggest sin is having a weak heart for those of your class, so please, don't break this old heart of mine. You have to run away! You have the chance so you must run away! That will allow you to prove to the world that you're still alive! So, once your business is over and you don't need anything else from this Tower, leave and live!! If you don't leave in time, it'll be the end of you!

Chapter 4: Minotaur

This chapter contains scenes that showcase explicit violence (gore). This and the previous chapters have been edited so that the name of a character matches that of the current canon.



As much as they wanted to open their eyes, they couldn't. Their vision was empty, but not because there was no light. They could feel a warm light hugging their eyelids, despite not being able to open them. However, they weren't startled at all by that situation. They congratulated themselves for not falling into the despair a situation such as that could cause them. Because they also couldn't move their legs.

Or their torso.

Or their left arm.

Only their head and right arm remained free. In an instant, they found out any word they wanted to let out would vanish in their mouth before they could spit it out.

They sat on a chair - well, to be precise, *they were sat* on a chair. Right arm lay on top of what they thought was a table in front of them. Said table was empty, too, as they couldn't find anything with their free arm. Only the sound of their breathing made them company. The smell of ash shrunk their lungs.

Why they didn't freak out was beyond them. They remained calm as if it were the most normal thing in the world. A strange peace surrounded and hugged them until they couldn't move. They slowly took abundant breaths at the same time their mind fused in the nothingness.

Before they started to feel the effects of starvation, the sound of a door opening and closing could be heard behind them.

"Hold this."

A juvenile voice they didn't recognize. If they had to guess, based on the range of their voice, their way of speaking, the fact that they didn't even say 'hello', and given how their steps were so light they couldn't hear them walking in front of them, they would say they were at most fifteen years old. For some reason, their voice felt distant, as if they were on another room.

Along with their voice, the clank of a tray against the top of the table. Their fingers felt its coldness, their wrist the warmth of a foreign hand. Their hand came in contact with what they thought to be the top part of the tray. They also identified large object with a round, flat base on one of the edges. At first, they thought it was a tool, but they didn't know what kind. As instructed, they took the iron-textured object in their hand. However, before lifting it they took notice of another object beside it with the back of their fingers - this one wooden.

"Now hold it as you would a telescope."

The other person didn't lose the grip on their wrist as they set their arm in a ninety degree angle. Their position was adjusted, elevating the unknown apparatus a tad. The edge that lay nearest to their head - the one without the base - lay below the other one diagonally. Thanks to gravity, of course, the object fell through their fingers until the base met their pinky finger. It was without a doubt too thin to be a telescope. They felt as the grip on their wrist loosened.

"Don't move."

They didn't have any other option, so they obliged. They couldn't come up with a reason as to why disobey that voice. While, yes, the pose was curious at best, they didn't feel as though they were in any kind of disadvantage. Following those orders became extremely easy. There was nothing to be afraid of. They certainly knew they would be alright. Not even the sound of a hand lifting wood distraught them. The light that struck their closed eyelids was eclipsed.

A thud. Iron against iron. Iron against metal. Metal against flesh. A marvelous domino effect caused a horrible sting in the upper right part of their forehead. They could hear the creak of something breaking into pieces, but they couldn't hear their own screams of pain. In fact, their lips remained still. Their teeth didn't grind. Their grip on the tool was the same. Their arm was still in its place. No part in their body resisted. Multiple stings followed, picking up the pace at an astonishing velocity. Upon hearing the same sound of breaking over and over, they understood where that pain came from.

A chisel. An iron chisel. That's what they were holding. The other object was a hammer - having only touched the handle, they erred in thinking the object was fully wooden. The other person was chiseling them. They soon felt blood pouring from their forehead and into the rest of their face. There was nothing they could do. All their efforts were in vain.

All but one. They realized their index finger reacted each time the hammer hit the chisel. If they could reclaim control over their index, they could bit by bit reclaim control of their whole body. They could still free themselves before it was too late. There was still hope.

They focused on the top of their finger, trying their best on ignoring each hit of the chisel, every foul sound.

The first knuckle responded to their wishes after much effort, but the other person didn't stop their massacre.

By the time the second knuckle was freed from the invisible string that tied it into paralysis, the pain was unbearable. Yet they couldn't stop, they had to keep going so they could unlock the rest of their hand.

They felt as their mind vanished when they took control of their whole index - they could faint at any moment.

In the same way they did with their index, they attempted to free the rest of the fingers on their hand. It was an incredible effort, but one by one they ungripped the chisel.

First, the middle finger, knuckle after knuckle, regained its freedom.

Then, the ring finger came off, after much effort in leaving their formless prison.

And then...

A beam of light pierced the outer shell - their arm fell to the side and the chisel to the ground. The other person stuck their hand in the newly formed crack and pulled it wide open. Their bloodstained eyelashes fluttered so their eyes could see. Two perfect halves, filled to the brim of strings of coagulated blood and brains - and between them there it was. With their vision still blurry, they could see a foreign hand searching through their innards. A new and indescribable sensation. Both people's clothes were stained red.

From their insides, the person in front of them found what they were looking for and took it out. That minuscule thing between their fingers gleamed in the light, but their dilated eyes weren't able to decipher what it was at such a short distance.

"Rejoice. Glory awaits."

The other person distanced that object reasonably so that they could see it. On their hand, a single pearl.

Vermillion woke up.

Morning greetings came in the form of fresh air hitting their body after removing sweaty bed sheets off of themselves. After rubbing their eyes, they made an effort of leaving the bed and get ready for another day. They remembered their conversation with Vertigo the day prior while they got dressed, and felt a little curiosity about the tour it was preparing them.

For a second, they imagined him staying awake all night trying to come up with the best itinerary. After some seconds, they realized why they were wrong. Vertigo probably couldn't "stay" awake all night even if it wanted to, thanks to being a phantasmagorical being. He most likely left the needs of the flesh behind.

As much as they attempted to comprehend the nature of their host, they couldn't understand it. Vermillion had always understood death as an eternal slumber, an opportunity to spend the rest of eternity as one saw fit. That was the reason why Vertigo's tenacity was so surprising. Every obligation that tied it to the world of the living had already been extinguished, he had no reason to stay there and refuse to explore the rest of the world. If they asked it, it would most likely say that carrying out their duty was fulfilling enough, that it didn't want to do anything else if given the change. And still...

Vermillion heard a knock on the door after putting on their gloves. Speak of the devil. A blue light entered the room when he opened the door:

"Good day! What a wonderful morning, no?" Sir Vertigo's voice was too energetic for Vermillion that early. "Prithee, come, breakfast awaits thee."

"Breakfast? But I don't... oh, yeah, sure." They remembered having told him their preferences the day before when they passed through the door.

An empty, wide dining room, with several long tables align in three rows. A ceiling high enough to reverberate every sound during noon. But at the time, only one of the tables offered food. The smell of fresh food was enough to wake up anybody. There was an appetizing tray of scrambled eggs, along with a water glass and jug. It wasn't a lot of food, but not scarce either - as if the chef could know they had to satiate a stomach not made for eating in the mornings.

...No, it wasn't that, they concluded. What a stupid idea. It was because he didn't want to waste food. Plus, there was no doubt he was trying to debilitate them by giving them so little food. Yes. That was it. It had to be.

Having sat down, they took the silverware in their hands and tapped them with their index claws. A habit they grew up with and still couldn't let go. Even though

they couldn't understand why they did it, it had already become a part of their routine whenever eating. At least it let them know it was real silverware.

Sir Vértigo found itself on the other edge of the table, but it didn't react. Whether he saw their ritual or not was unknown. Despite that, he kept his eye on Vermillion at all times. They weren't digging the feeling of being watched and not at the same time. It just stood there in front of them, hand on top of his end of the table. Which was empty.

"Aren't you having anything?"

"Fret not, for it hath been years since we last needed restoration. Furthermore, as a way to offer our best services, we have dedicated time and effort to search for the freshest ingredients in order to deliver such feast. We do not serve many guests as of late, yes? This is naught but a special occasion, worthy of demonstration of our culinary skills."

So Vermillion was right, after all. Having no body of his own, he had no longer the need to sustain himself. No food turning into nutrients, or air into oxygen. However...

"You do you, don't come after me if I don't leave leftovers."

"And why must that be a reason to get mad? A clean platter means a happy heart."

"Drop the act. I've seen how you were looking at my food."

"Then thy vision must be at fault. As previously mentioned, we do not require sustenance. What would be so enticing as to share this banquet?"

"You tell me. Maybe you're just embarrassed to ask for a bite so you'll cook up something for yourself later."

"Nonsense! Foolishness! Madness! Pointlessness! Idiocy! Thou dare to say my sin is gluttony? How dare thee? Thy attack makes my blood boil!" It stood up from the table in defense.

"Yeah, yeah, your pride forbids you, and all that." They waved their hand so he would sit on the table again. "It's a shame, it looks really good."

"Y-- litt--" Vertigo began and aborted sentence after sentence for a while. After having calmed down, it tried again: "We art pleased to know. Bon apetit!"

What a fit, they thought. And people said they were the one with the anger problems. It just went to show no one ever visited that place anymore. They couldn't care less, anyway, the saliva on their tongue and the smell of their luncheon was enough to distract them.

But then they realized who was in front of them. Waiting for them to begin eating. They hardened the grip on their utensils without realizing it.

"Go on, no need to be shy. It is not hot at all."

Not even half an hour were they awake without their head throbbing.

"I... don't like it when people see me while I'm..."

"Ah, no problem! Had we known we would have abstained beforehand. Very well, while thou fill up thy stomach, I shall explain the journey I have prepared for thou." He turned around, and a blackboard the size of a table appeared in front of him. "As thou would have probably figured, the integrity of our beloved Tower is malleable in the right hands. Well, it's a whole process, the Tower chooses its groundsmind depending on who has the cyst..."

"Grounfmind?" they asked with their mouth full.

"Y-- yes, it's akin to..." It smacked its lips before continuing. "Well, it's not important. The thing is I bear the ability to move rooms from one place to another, and that will be most useful. For you see, my plan is to take you to see rooms you have not seen before, so we can begin in the conservatory, trek along the catacombs, visit the gardens, the ceremony room, the training room (ooh, I think you'll like that one!), and if there's still time before lunch I could show you some of our relics. Sound good?"

"I mean, you're the efpert 'ere." Vermillion filled two glasses of water to swallow their food. "I believe in your qualities."

"Perfect!! Should you need anything from your room, take it now, for we won't stop until we're finished, alright? We must enjoy this morning to the fullest."

"Such energy! You really wanted to show me around, huh?"

Vermillion didn't even need to see his face to know what number that comment did on him.

"No!! It's just... it's just... since-- since it's been so long since we last did this-- and on top of that, with someone like you... No, w-wait I don't mean it like--!"

"Don't worry, your secret is safe with me. What happens in the dining room stays in the dining room."

"THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT!!!"

"Right, right... Well, I should go get my stuff." Vermillion put the beak part of their helmet in place and stood up to leave the room.

"Yes, you should." he sighed as he turned around. "And you better be quick, the less time we take the better. Please."

Having gotten back into their room, Vermillion carefully considered what to bring with them on their adventure. Once they made up their mind, they took what they needed and exited the room.

"Okay, I'm back."

"Wh--? How--? Already?!" Vertigo wasn't given time to even get comfortable on his seat. "We said be quick, not go in and out!"

"I follow your orders and you complain? What do you even want from me?"

"But-- There's no way in hell you--" he said, bringing his hand to his mouth after realizing what he just said. They were stunned as Vertigo's azure hue increased.

"Look, you know what? Let's go. Let's not waste any more time."

"Let's go, then." they declared while trying not to burst into laughter.

After crossing the gate, a great room appeared. A huge grandstand pointed toward an enormous, elevated stage that shimmered in the light of the glass panes behind it. Vermillion had also noticed that on the walls to the sides there were balconies with stands even higher. The air was heavy, their gauntlets became dusty when they rested themselves on the handrail. Sir Vertigo's voice rang throughout the enclosure:

"This here be the conservatory. It was built a decade after the Tower's establishment. Since this was a neutral area, we learned to be artists during times of peace, and each one of us knights was instructed to play one or several musical instruments."

"Really? Who could've guessed? You all look so menacing on that painting."

"We used to abstain from practice until there was nothing left to defend, but the greatest concerts were given after declaring victory."

"So, what? Were you good?"

"Oh, they were the best. Having participated even on one of them would have been an honor, but alas... to modify the organs so we could be able to play them single-handedly was too expensive... we could only allow to modify the one on the cathedral with out of our own pocket. Furthermore, the artisan took a long time to arrive to the Tower, so..."

"That's fucked up, and you even had to pay for it."

"Do not worry, we mean it. It is not as though we could be able to learn to play another instrument with just one hand, ha..."

When the silence had reached them, they had already walked in front of the stage. Vertigo floated on top of it, and then turned around and made some steps for Vermillion.

"I haven't actually learned how to play anything." they declared, going up.

"Is that so? We art certain thou would fancy it." Vertigo extended its hand, which made Vermillion pause.

"...You think so?" In the end, they took it to reach the top.

"Why, of course!" He turned Vermillion around so they could see the grandstand, with his hand on their back. "Imagine: thou, a part of the symphony, joined by a group of artist thy size to a loving audience which adores that which thou love to

make more than anything... or, at least, that is what we believe it feels to play among colleagues. Would that not be marvelous?"

"Heh, I'm not sure they'll accept me without having practiced before."

"We could teach thee!" Vertigo's touch left their back and now aimed for their waist, and Vermillion retracted on instinct. "There art things we do not know, but, we could learn together!"

"I don't know if I..."

"It is incredibly beneficial! It will help thee get better control over thy body, see!"

"Vertigo--"

"Even on the loneliest of days thou will feel accompanied!!"

"Vertigo, I said no!"

Without realizing it, Vermillion had taken backwards steps until they reached the edge of the platform. When the ground beneath them came to a halt, the fall felt eternal until they hit the hard stone.

After opening their eyes again, they couldn't see their companion anymore. They looked around to find it, but in its place they only found an organ. As it turned out, they were in the cathedral again, but this time they were on the triforium. Upon looking at the instrument so closely, it became apparent that they had underestimated its height. At that time they could understand, at least on a surface level, Sir Vertigo's fixation with said object.

Soon after that, they focused on why they had wound up there, of all places. Taking into account the conversation they just had, one would suspect Vertigo. Maybe he was trying to prove a point somehow? They looked at the organ's pedals and, indeed, they were clearly modified. However, before they could get a closer look, a flash took them out of their trance. A flash that came from behind them, no matter where they were looking.

For an instant, they felt as though something was moving in that direction, still this was no new feeling. They knowingly rummaged through their mane until they took out a crystal ball, the one to blame for that light. It was cold to the touch - more than they remembered, truth be told. It fit into their hands as if it was made for them, and Vermillion's eyes braced themselves from the light until they got a glimpse of what was inside. Or, rather, they didn't - they could hardly make out what they were seeing. The image was dark and low on detail, but they could at least tell it was showing them a hallway or something similar.

Having put their concentration on the circular files on the walls, a subtle noise made itself known. A noise that, were it not for the tremendous echo, would be insignificant. It was the sound of a small piece falling and spinning over itself on

the floor. The sound of a coin. Vermillion laid their eyes beyond the triforium to look for its origin. Upon looking downwards, they failed at finding the coin, but they found something else. A red armor had appeared next to the altar.

'...E... N...' Vermillion could've sworn they heard someone.

The armor, as expected, didn't move an inch from its position. They had the feeling it would when they would least expect it, hence why they didn't take their eyes off of it.

'...E... L... N...'

And then, without a trace of hastiness, it moved. Vermillion saw as, bit by bit, its helmet rotated. The crystal ball had disappeared from their mind, so much so that they stopped registering they were holding it.

'...ER ...L ...N!'

When they realized the helmet's movement ceased, it was clear as day the armor was staring at them.

"*Vermillion!*"

In the blink of an eye, they were back at the conservatory. Vertigo had lifted their back from the ground and, judging by its tone, it had been trying to reach them for a while. Their legs were also resting on top of the platform's wall, for some reason.

"Oh! Thank goodness! I thought thou would not be able to come to thy senses..."

"Wha...?" Vermillion attempted to lift themselves off the ground, but a hand stopped them from doing so.

"Please, do not attempt harsh movements! Thou just fell from the stage and have been unconscious several minutes. Art thou all right?"

So that was it, they supposed... Of course. Vermillion had left the crystal ball on their room the day prior, anyways. They didn't bring it with them on this excursion. All of it was a dream, like the last time they saw the armor. Their mind felt weightless, probably for having bought it. How stupid on their part, they thought.

"Vermillion?!" The silence that revelation had rightfully worried Vertigo.

"Huff... how long was I out?"

"Around... half an hour?"

"HALF AN HO--?!" They immediately got interrupted by their newfound dizzy state. "Argh!!"

"Be careful!! Look, we'd better wrap it up for today, that seem fine? Let us go back to thy room so thou can rest properly, I'll give thee the tour on some other occasion."

"No... no, don't worry, there's no need to..." Hand on their helmet, they slowly stood up using their elbows.

"Surely thou jest?! Thou art in no way to follow the itinerar--!"

"I-I insist. I'll be fine, just..." They barely managed to sit on the nearest seat. "Just give me a second, okay?"

"Absolutely not! We will go to thy room whether thou like it or not."

"No, we won't, stop being so annoying! I really am fine! I swear!"

Vermillion stood up from their seat, attempting to hide how they stumbled. Of course, that resilience exercise was not enough to impress Sir Vertigo, who looked at them with apparent worry on its face.

"...Please." Was the only thing they came up with to convince him they could go on.

This last streak of dreams did not make them want to go back to bed.

"... All right. I shall wait for thee at the entrance."

And with that, Vertigo vanished and Vermillion sat down again. Their headache would subside eventually.

On their way through the tower's endless hallways, Vermillion could not shake what had happened beyond their eyes. Twice had they seen that armor in dreams, and both times had reminded them of the enigma of the coin that saved a person. They knew it was just their imagination, but they thought about which part of reality made them have these dreams. After all, the brain cannot brain that which it has not seen. Plus, they weren't the kind of person whose dreams had a part two.

The closest they ever got to that was experimenting the same nightmare time and time again - but even the one (ones?) they had that day were something they had never dreamt before. Never would they ever be able to imagine how unsettling it would feel for their head to be opened like that. Only remembering the cold air grazing through their brains was enough to give them goosebumps.

They promised to let it go, but, at the same time, thinking about it while they weren't in danger felt comforting. They could manage to investigate about the real nature of their dreams in an attempt to rationalize them. They couldn't hurt them in the real world, so, why not try?

"...Would thee not agree?" A familiar voice brought them back to earth.

"Wh--? Um, uh... Yeah," they improvised, but their companion's sigh revealed their attempt was futile.

"Art thou even paying attention?" Vertigo stopped to take a look at them, hand on his hip. "Let me remind thee it was thou who insisted on continuing."

"Of course I am!"

"Thou art?"

"I mean it!!"

"Very well. In that case, could thou tell me where we are?" he questioned while their hand hid underneath his tunic, arm over his torso. Vermillion swiftly interpreted it as its way to cross its arms.

"Ah...! That's..." They looked around in hopes to find something, anything that could help him. "Well..."

Vertigo closed its eyes and grimaced at its own astonishment.

"Don't look at me like that! As if you've never zoned out while being spoken to!"

"At least I don't do it with information I've asked for!"

"Fine, look, you know what? Fair enough. I'm sorry. I'll listen to you for real this time."

Much of his regret, he, who had opened his eyes again, saw as Vermillion lifted their thumb in approval. It swallowed the way it made it cringe and began its explanation anew:

"We art in the catacombs. Had thou paid attention, thou would know the rectangular holes on the walls once carried the bodies of visitors that couldn't complete their travels. Certainly, this was only a temporary measure until their friends or family reclaimed their bodies so they could bury them according to their wishes. Hence why there art no more left, all cadavers ended up finding somebody who would take care of them after death."

"Cool." Vermillion felt one of the walls with their hand and, of course, the hole on their side was empty. "And how did you know the people who came for the corpses were who they said they were? I imagine there were plenty of bounty hunters ready to make some profit."

"About that... truth is I'm unaware of it. Given I wasn't assigned to this zone, I didn't learn how their identities were verified."

"I see, " they replied, expecting a different answer. "Say, is your body over here?"

"What?! Of course not!!"

Sir Vertigo's answer took Vermillion by surprise. The way it spoke, no wonder it didn't like that question at all, it even seemed disgusted. Why he took it as an offense they didn't know. Despite not knowing the reason behind his outburst, they knew it was out of character.

"Hah! That checks out. No one as selfish as you would want to rest in anything other than a golden coffin," they concluded after seconds of deliberation. They couldn't know what was happening in that head of its, but at least they wanted to lower the stakes.

"I don't even know why I entertain thee," they sighed. "Come, follow me, yeah? We have more important business to attend to."

The both of them followed down those maze-like hallways. Vermillion was glad to have put Vertigo on their side, somehow - if they were still enemies, they wouldn't want to visit these catacombs on their own. They paid full attention to their guide's movements, even though following his light was enough.

However, their interest came to a stop when the lower part of their cape got stuck on one of the holes on the wall. They expected it was stuck on a rough piece of stone, but when they pulled it it ripped itself horizontally. They were lucky it wasn't torn all the way and was still connected to the rest.

Instant regret was felt upon seeing the mess they made, but that unease vanished at the appearance of a more urgent emotion. All of a sudden, from the hole on the wall emerged a tile of the same size, long as a pillar, against the opposite wall. The bang was loud enough for them to thank whichever entity they stopped believing in for having taken their cape out in time. To Vermillion's surprise, that wasn't the only attempt at ending their life, since, one by one and in a quick motion, more tiles came out of every hole to hunt them down.

"Verti--!!" they tried, but their companion was way ahead of them and not even his trail was there. "*Fuuuuuuck!* You're lucky you're already dead!"

They picked up the pace and continued forward to avoid the catacomb's quick jaws. Every turn and crossing they passed through they could see the walls engulfing the very same hallways they had just come through - Vermillion repeated every prayer they knew so that they would go to the correct way and not meet their demise. They ran like never before, and their legs weren't able to handle that much effort in such short notice. But still, despite the drops of sweat running along their back, despite the velocity in which their energy depleted, despite the sound of the space behind them disappearing, getting closer and closer, they kept on running. And they ran until they couldn't anymore, until their whole body told them to stop, until they lost their way - and then, they kept running. They could hardly catch their breath, their mouth agape and dry, but they kept running anyway.

After their last turn, they had realized they wound up at a dead end: the entrance to the next room was covered in more long tiles that acted as bars. They got closer in the blink of an eye to avoid getting squashed.

"Help!! Vertigooooo!" And, as if by magic, beyond their prison a faint, blue light was born. "VERTIGO!! *Please!* Shit, it can't hear me!!"

Vermillion gazed back to make sure they had enough time to live. It would still take a while for the walls to get to them, but, at their unrelenting pace, minutes became seconds. They took the bars that kept them in captivity and attempted to hit them, move them, do *something* so they would go away. Please, anything. Please. They had to get out. It couldn't end there. Please, they had to... They had to...!

The improvised bars that forbid them from escaping went away and they fell forward, escaping from the hallway's jaws miraculously. Heart beating a mile a minute, they crawled away from the hallway. Once they acknowledged they were out danger and the tiles wouldn't get to them where they stood, they stopped hyperventilating.

"There you are!" Having tilted their head, they saw the blue light again, and its bearer with it. "What were you doing back there?"

"W--W-Wha-W--WHAT?!" they exclaimed after getting up to their feet as quickly as they could. "Fighting for my life, that's what!!"

"Okay...?"

"IT'S TRUE!! The--the tombs, they... i-in the holes, they came out of-- and they wanted to reach--!"

Sir Vertigo's clear disbelief was not helping their case. Did he really not hear anything that...?

"Look, it's the second time I find you on the floor today. I'm starting to get worried."

"You have to believe me! Look!" Vermillion showed him the torn-up end of their cape. "W-whatever that thing was did this to me!"

"It must've been a sharp stone. Relax... uh..."

Then Vertigo became silent as it brought its hand to its chin. After some seconds of keeping quiet, he stuck up his index finger upon noticing Vermillion was about to speak.

"Don't tell me." he interrupted.

"Did you forget what my name was? But you just said it a while ago!"

"Don't you never forget things? Plus, we haven't known each other for that long."

"Are you fucking with me?!"

"I'm not good with names, okay?!" it grumbled, no longer meeting Vermillion's eyes.

"Starts with V."

"V..."

"Ve..."

"Veee..." it repeated.

"...rrrrmm..."

"Veerrrr... Vermont."

"No."

"Verrrrrrmmmmmm... Vermicelli."

"No."

"Verrrrmmmm, Verm, Verm, Verm, Verm-- Vermouth?"

"It's Vermillion!"

"That's what I was gonna say!" Liar. That stupid conversation was taking too long.
"Well, it matters not. We're losing time. Let's go, Vermeille."

"Vermillion!!"

And they left.

They both confidently reached a vast and spacious part of Firewall Tower. Full of well preserved vegetation, it had a ceiling so high one could not discern when the skylight ended and when it began. Despite its lack of ventilation, the air was not so suffocating - although very few would sacrifice their health just to look at the pretty plants. As per usual, Vertigo spoke first:

"These here" be the gardens. Not many have been able to bask in its beauty, since visits to these lands were scarce, reserved only to those important enough to see them. I imagine this moment would be very--"

"A-achoo!" intervened Vermillion against their will. "Achoo! Euueeeegh... Ah! Aaachoo!!!"

"H-hey, art thou feeling all right?" He turned to them with clear worry.

"It's just... Achoo! It's my allergies, they act up during spring... Ah! A-ACHOO!"

"Egads! Let us leave before it gets worse. Prithce excuse our recklessness."

"N-no, it's... ACHOO!" Their sneezing became more intense the more they stayed in that place. "It's my fault, I thought... ACHOO! *ACHOO!* I thought it wouldn't be that big of a-- Ah! AAAACHOO!!!"

Thanks to their embarrassing, newly exposed weakness, Vermillion was taken out to the exit. Despite how little time they were in there, however, they appreciated Sir Vertigo's efforts to show them the gardens. They felt as though they were insulting its exclusivity with their sneezing. They didn't understand why skipping that part of the tour made them feel so guilty, but, just for a moment, the smell transported them to some other time.

A time very far away. A time where nothing had gone wrong yet. When they were still an intern at the academy, there was a class they were most excited to go to. Not because of the curriculum, no - it was something more fun.

The rumble of steps and young laughter spread through the hallway they just entered. Right at the end was the classroom they liked so much, and in front of its door was... her.

They always had a cordial relationship with their fellow colleagues, but one of them made a beautiful rivalry bloom on their chest. Before they could realize, the clash of their personalities could've started it all. A strange kind of pride forbid them from seeing the other as equal, they both wanted to be better than the other. They both aimed for the head.

Even then her smile was enough to kill.

"Miss Regal."

"I told you already not to treat me like a teacher outside of class." she giggled.
"How're you doing? Been a while since I last saw you."

"I think I'm alright, but these last couple of weeks have been killing me. I hate the end of the semester... I still gotta work on the questions for the final exam before the end of the week. How have you been holding up?"

"To be frank I got most of them done. Besides, we were given a lot of time to prepare them - what have you been doing in the meantime?"

"There's something called teaching discipline, does it ring any bells?"

"I think that says more about you than it says about me. Well, you do you, I got a plan to make my students get the best grade in the whole school. Early bird gets the worm."

"Yeah, sure, I'd love to see how seriously they take your itsy bitsy exam if you don't make them fear it, " they remarked before cringing. *Did they really say 'itsy bitsy exam'?*

"Wait and see, Vermillion. Wait and see."

Once they had crossed the classroom door, they sat on their respective positions. The kids' banter became a whisper once Vermillion took their seat. She was the first to speak:

"Alright, class. You might know them from previous lectures, and if you don't, this is Mx. Von Kavalier. They're only here to take some notes from today's class, so please welcome them, okay?"

And they did so in unison - a wave of falsettos made them be included in the group, at least for an hour. To hear them all speak at the same time made them a little embarrassed. She really knew how to push their buttons while she was seen as innocent.

The following minutes were at least more manageable. Vermillion did nothing but pay attention, eyeing the rest of the students from time to time. Some faces were familiar, some not so much. Many of them looked away when Vermillion caught them staring. One of them didn't. A girl in a broom. She just smiled and waved at them. What a weirdo, they thought.

She interrupted the lecture by giving out some problems:

"Exercises 3, 4 and 5 are to be solved now and corrected next week, alright? And go ahead and attempt number 6 too, but only if you want to. That one's harder than the rest, so don't worry if you don't get it, but at least try to do the rest right now, okay?"

'Yes, teach', they all said in unison, deception evident on their faces. Vermillion could empathize with them to a point - they didn't like to waste time either. They knew she forced their students to work in class to build healthy learning habits or whatever, but those kids would only see it as an obligation instead of a favor. Before they could open their exercise books, she spoke anew:

"However. If anybody, even if it's just one person, solves all of them, number 6 included, before class is over, I will share with you one of the questions of the next exam."

What?! That woman had gone crazy, they thought. It wasn't fair, she was letting them cheat! She was playing dirty!! They decided they would have a long, arduous conversation with her after class. A foul like that should leave her out of the competition for some months.

At that moment, tens of pencils impacted against paper, dragging until the classroom became an orchestra of graphite and wood. Hypocrites that they were, for they were lead by a succulent incentive rather than their own ambition. What a shame, but worse was the witch that let them take the shortcut. One of the youths raised their hand with haste and came closer to her to verify their answer.

"Attention! A promise is a promise - I'll tell you what the question is. But I want those exercises done by the end of the hour, alright? Before we leave, I'll check your notebooks to see if you've been working or not, am I clear?"

And so she did. Time flew by, and then class was dismissed. Only two remained in the classroom, waiting for her to get her things and leave. Vermillion didn't let their resentment eclipse their courtesy.

"I'm just saying it's a bad idea. You're getting weak, they're gonna take advantage of you if you keep being so lenient."

"Is that what you think? Quite on the contrary, I'm the one in control here." She picked up her purse and put its handle over her shoulder, careful not to trap that crimson hair of hers. "Tell me, what do you know about choice paralysis?"

"Never heard of it," they answered after taking the keys and approaching the door with her.

"A teenager's mind goes through too many stages for them to process. The last thing they pay mind to is their classes, so it's only normal for them to sweep them under the rug until the last minute. But since their unlearned curriculum gets piled up, they don't know where to begin and they get stuck. All I'm doing is guiding them. By giving them one of the questions, they at least have something to prepare without feeling like they're wasting their time. They will try their best to prepare the perfect answer beforehand - and they'll actually learn something instead of memorizing paragraph after paragraph. Plus, since it's something they've gotten

out of me, they think they're the smart ones here, but in reality they're doing exactly what I want them to do: learn."

Vermillion soon found out the both of them were nearing the campus' exit. The timid sun that hid behind pink clouds was about to go down. Not a glimpse of wind could save them from the searing weather the grounds subjugated them day after day. However, somehow, for some reason beyond them, pollen wasn't such a burden that afternoon.

"Heh, yeah, sure," they chuckled. "Get your head out of the clouds and I'll consider not disqualifying you from the best grade competition."

"Come on, don't tell me you don't like my idea!" she smiled again. "At least admit you had fun. I saw you make a new friend."

"What do you mean?"

And then, they heard those words leave her mouth.

Those same words that made their heart skip a beat.

Even though her voice reached their ears, even though they were able to read her lips, they couldn't accept her words - so they didn't.

For they couldn't allow themselves to think about them.

"What?! What did you just say?!"

"Huh? Dutchess, the girl with the broom. I saw her waving at you earlier." She mimicked the movement.

"Ah... ah, Darkness, that's what you said... okay..."

"No, it's--"

"No matter, your little mind game is stupid and I doubt it would serve you well! Such a waste of time!!"

Vermillion did everything in their power to avert the conversation as soon as possible. And so, they each parted ways in hopes that they would win after some more minutes of banter.

Weeks passed before the final exams' grades were revealed. Despite Vermillion's effort, Rouge came victorious thanks to her method. She rubbed it on their face for several months - even fellow teachers were talking about it.

Vermillion was always a sore loser - nevertheless, their ire were overshadowed by something else. Something they, at the time, couldn't comprehend.

"Doth thou feel any better?"

"Huff... so-so, but now that we're out of there my sinuses will open up for once." Of this Vermillion was sure, for they could feel the air run through their nose again. "Thanks for the handkerchief, by the way."

"Think nothing of it. We have more than enough, ask away should thou need any more," he expressed with content.

"I'm good for now. Where do we go next? I think I remember you mentioning a training room..."

"Ah, yes, of course! Let us go."

Immediately thereafter, they headed for the next room. It appeared to be an extension of the armory they had already found on their first day in the tower. Just like its companion, there were weapons galore, but it was more spacious and, therefore, more fitting to train on. Furthermore, those hay-filled ragdolls they used for training were quite peculiar, though there were also wooden ones for more experienced trainees. It was hard to tell at a glance, but there were also archery targets on one of the further walls.

"Well, as thou might have imagined, this here be where the majority of our training sessions as knights took place. We art lucky enough to have such wonderful installations - we practiced an endless amount of sports. Heh, we even fell on top of a fellow companion when we used the climbing wall once." it laughed. "What a scolding we had to go through! Nevertheless, boredom was not a word in these four walls. We art still in possession of an obstacle course, if our memory serves us right."

"You were right about this place. I do like it here." They were no doubt wonderful installations.

"I knew it!" it exclaimed with perhaps too much enthusiasm before clearing its throat. "The moment we were aware of thy proficiency in the library, we were convinced thou would be plenty fond of it."

"You know? I had my doubts, but I'm glad I kept on with this trip. Despite there being some hiccups..."

"To know thy stay has proven beneficial to thee is just great to hear. We wish to thank thee for thy trust in us."

As expected, such gratitude filled them with euphoria. Praise wasn't all that common in their life, and never got to experience so much in so little time - for

something they didn't even have to try. Deep down, they were aware that it was all an act of courtesy, but behind that feeling lay the desire that those words that caressed their heart were genuine.

"I'm up for a spar, what do you say?" Vermillion took a fighting stance and extended their talons. "I might be scrawny but I can pack a punch, just so you know."

"Pardon? What reason would there be to initiate combat with a guest of Honor?"

"You're no fun." they returned in disappointment.

It was in that moment they recalled the existence of another room. One whose memories of it remained wrapped, packed and buried until their mind returned them to them. Perhaps to mention it would be excessive, but they needed to rip the band-aid off.

They swallowed before heading to the armory they were already familiar with - Sir Vertigo only followed quietly despite its curiosity. Upon entering, Vermillion became sick to their stomach once they recognized that room, just in that one corner, right where it was the last time they checked.

Given how Vertigo was approaching their direction from the right, they doubted on saying something or staying silent. They had already seen what was in it, anyways. They were smart enough to figure out what would happen to those who entered there. Biting their tongue, they questioned:

"How many people have entered?"

"...The confession room?"

Confession room. The term was enough to disgust them. In light of their lack of response, Sir Vertigo continued:

"Merely the necessary."

"And how many have come out?"

Then his turn to remain silent arrived. As Vermillion turned their head, the first thing they saw were his burn scars.

"How many?" they insisted.

"Depends if they were telling the truth or not."

"How many?!"

Truth be told, talking that way made them think they were out of control. Was there any reason they cared about something like that? In the end, the people who stepped in there were already gone, so why care, right? *Right?* Then, why did that helplessness unsettle them so much?

What were they forgetting?

A misplaced document came to mind.

By then, they could tell his next answer would be another excuse, so they just let it happen.

"Many were lucky enough to only get wounded on easy to conceal parts of their body. See, the most visible scars were reserved for the worst of them. For most, it became embarrassing to move on with their lives and endure the humiliation which lay in plain view. For it was proof that, even for an instant, one's discipline was not enough. Unthinkable for the likes of thee, aye?"

They couldn't take it. An immense headache bubbled up in their head as the conversation continued.

"So, you only used it on criminals, right? Not on bystanders?"

"Only with that who was lead astray," it corrected, despite the guest of Honor's lack of satisfaction. "We beseech thee not to worry, as those that survived were lightly damaged, for their wounds were no bigger than a fist."

Vermillion didn't know what to make of it. They couldn't handle that much information all at once. Why they received it was obvious, but had they known that they would uncover, they would've stored their resentment for another time.

They knew that story wouldn't have a happy ending. Maybe they were expecting Vertigo to prove them wrong, tell them the confession room never ended up being used. That it was all in their head. Ultimately, that hope was for naught.

The minute they snapped out of it, they sighed - a loud creak then announced that the door in front of them was opened. A small portion of the next room could be seen, yet how little the door had moved was puzzling to Vermillion. As soon as they turned to face Sir Vertigo, they discovered he was no longer there. Dammit! Why did it keep running away?

They were already inside when they realized it, but that wasn't the strangest thing of all, for the chamber they were in was not the confession room. A sole walkway in the middle of an abyss was the only way forward. Soon after stepping forward, however, loads of traps were activated: axe pendulums, spikes, darts, flamethrowers, they had to cross canes, vanishing pieces of the floor, tightrope, had to balance themselves and do pirouettes, dodge spears, slide through ice, use the rule of three, select all images that contained a dog, clean someone else's spilled water, dodge poison arrows and boil water. A most detestable obstacle course. It was getting ridiculous.

The moment they reached the other side and opened the door in front of them, they immediately snapped.

There he was again.

"Ah, we were expectant of thy arrival. Marvelous, we shall continue. Here be the conference ro-"

"*Can you stop doing that?!*" they yelled, and Vertigo flinched. "Please."

"Doing what?"

"Everywhere I go there's a trap waiting for me. First the conservatory's stage, then the tombs, then the allergies - and now whatever that was about! I thought this would be a friendly visit? Or is there any motive to halt the truce now?"

Out of all the reasons they could come up to explain Vertigo's actions, one stuck out from the rest. A memory of where they were the previous night, and the files they saw there, resurfaced. Did it know that they knew? That was the most sensible conclusion they could come to.

"Is that why thou were taking so long to keep up? But that's... I understand now, so that's why..."

What?

"Dude. What? It wasn't you??"

"No?"

It was bluffing, they were sure of it. The tower was barren save for Vertigo and them - it had to have been him, right? There was no other way. There *couldn't* be another way.

"Yeah, right. Who else could've been?"

"If it is who we think it is, it might've been the same person who trapped you in the archive last night... Excuse me for a second, I must talk with the higher ups if we want this nonsense to stop."

Vermillion was faced with an immense stupefaction. What did that even mean? They were sure he was the last one of the tower's knight unit, so what was that about? Were its superiors actually there?

...What were they thinking? Of course not.

"Do you take me for an idiot?"

"Please, stay in this room until I come back. You should be safe in here."

Before they could get a word in, it disappeared into the ceiling above. To say that Vermillion was pissed was an understatement. He was supposed to make them company on the rooms they didn't know. Where was that pride that drove it into preparing the tour guide? They would have to content themselves with searching on their own, again.

The room they were in resulted to be smaller than the rest, with familiar banners hung on its walls. On every corner of the room were decorative armors, and one of the walls had a map of the zone between the valley and the forest, and a shelf full of books. Furthermore, nearing an empty wall were chairs stacked upon each other, as well as a round table in which strategic discussions were supposedly held. It had seen better days - its scratches were old and faded but still prominent. They could only imagine what discussions would create such a commotion.

For an instant, something was heard. Something Vermillion couldn't quite identify. If asked to describe it, they would probably say it sounded as stones rolling down a hill. The sound was distant enough to only be heard by those with sharp ears, and then it stopped.

After that, the only sound was their heartbeat ricocheting off the walls of their throat.

The armors on the corners swiftly got rid of their spiderwebs, drew their swords and lunged at them. Despite their newfound enemies' sudden onslaught, their quick reaction time aided them in jumping on top of the table in an attempt to slow them down. Taking into account their lack of weaponry, they mainly dodged their thrusts and refrained themselves from attacking with their talons until their opponents let their guard down. In retrospective, leaving their dagger in their room was a stupid decision. They really had no trouble defending themselves - the real problem arose when the corners of the room opened up, and from within the darkness entered more and more armors.

An ambush like that proved to be too powerful for them. Their instincts were failing them. They took a couple of hits before they realized it. A wrong move. They stumbled. They failed to block an attack.

A sword rose over their head. The world cut to black.

Their eyes opened with the sound of sword against sword. In front of them, an armor with their back turned against them, blocking the attack clearly meant for them. The armor itself was practically identical to those of its kin - the only difference was it wasn't on the side of its brethren. It made haste in defeating its sibling, which fell motionless on the ground. It repeated the motion until enough room was made for Vermillion to catch their breath.

Before they could assimilate what had just transpired, the armor threw its sword at them and they caught it in midair. It promptly grabbed another sword from one of

the beaten armors and stood close to Vermillion, back to back. There was no time to think, so they prepared themselves for the next wave. Thanks to sword, the force of their attacks augmented considerably. Let it be known that they needed the friendly armor's help on occasion (and vice versa). In essence, that sudden alliance turned out to be mutually beneficial.

In the blink of an eye, every single armor was defeated, and Vermillion was ready to drop. They allowed themselves to sigh and rest their joints.

"Hah... Thanks," they huffed.

As for the friendly armor, it first poked the rest of the armors with its foot and then with the tip of its sword to ensure they were beat. Once it was satisfied, they faced Vermillion, pointing at them with the edge of its blade.

Its behavior surprised them, yet they soon realized why it was defending them in the first place - it merely sought to erase the competition.

Nevertheless, Vermillion attacked first, winning some space on the small of the table. No matter the speed of their stabs, the armor was able to stop them with their blade, although not without recoiling. Their dance went on until, with a well-aimed blow, Vermillion twisted its hold on the sword and made it fly off onto the corner of the room.

Having unarmed it, Vermillion didn't hold back and proceeded on their attack. To their surprise, their offensive was unfruitful, since it was able to defend itself by stopping their blows with its index and middle fingers. A feeble attempt at mocking their abilities, no doubt. They were sure it thought it was better than them, hence why it wasn't attacking. Vermillion was frankly getting tired of their own courtesy - they had to put it in its place.

Once they pushed it to the edge of the table, they leaped to the other side and threw the sword to its legitimate owner.

"Is that all you got?!" they laughed in open arms.

The armor ran to the center of the table and Vermillion followed suit. While it prepared itself to swing its sword, they kept on drawing near with a glint in their eyes. They were having the time of their life. The rush of adrenaline coursing through their body made their exhaustion disappear into thin air - and they loved it. What a feeling! Such ecstasy fed their ego until it atrophied. Their heart was rotting with desire and wanted more and more and *more* until they couldn't feel their body anymore.

Just as the armor came closer, they slid on the table and kicked its ankle, making it trip and fall over its right leg onto the ground below. The hit was bad enough to make it grab its leg to recover from the pain, all the while they walked to the corner of the room and got the sword back. For a second, Vermillion thought they heard

someone hissing in anguish, but they knew it was impossible. Out of the corner of their eye, they noticed the armor's attempt at standing up, and so they replied by thrusting sword between breastplate and tasset. Its helm looked upwards as it arched its back until it remained unmoving. From its 'wound', pieces of stone came out. They figured.

"Don't move," they warned as they pointed to the ground.

At that point, Vertigo's claim of that room being safe was false, so they decided on what their next move would be. Given how the door they entered through was closed off, they didn't have that many options. Plus, the corners from which the avalanche of armors entered were back to their original positions. Vermillion decided to inspect them anyways, pushing defeated armors aside so they were able to reach. At first glance, there didn't seem to be an apparent opening mechanism. Perhaps it was on the other side of the wall? They closed their eyes as they imagined the kind of device that would be able to deconstruct and reconstruct the corners in such short notice.

Vermillion was forced to open their eyes again. A sharp sting to the head was enough.

A frenzy of pillars had trapped them there and then. They came from all directions and, despite only one of them hitting them, they were unlucky enough to be hit on their head, almost fainting. They could feel blood pooling from under their helmet as they fell to their knees. At the same time, the armor, that had been pointing at them, grabbed the hilt of its sword and struggled as it took it out of its innards. The pillars were withdrawn in the same breath it rose up from the ground and limped toward their direction. Since Vermillion was about to lose consciousness, it brought the edge of its sword to its victim's shoulder, making its way towards their neck.

Until it stopped. A few seconds later, the fallen armors went back to where they came from as prey fleeing from their predator. The friendly armor did so as well, but not without Vermillion. It grabbed them from their back and covered the part of their helmet where their mouth would be with its hand as the wall surrounded them. Were it not for their headache and their dizziness, they would've fought against its grip. However, they were at their limit and, as such, could only watch through the crack on the wall. Given how close their companion was, they assumed the hole was for it to see, although they didn't understand its purpose until they heard him:

"Von Kavalier?"

They observed as a blue light passed through the crack until they saw him in his entirety. Sir Vertigo was back, and it was looking through every one of the conference room's nook and crannies. Vermillion's breath died on their tongue as they felt pressure building up in front of their mouth.

"Oh, please, not again." Its voice was practically a whisper. "Where could they have gone...?"

He kept searching for them for a good while until he sighed and gave up. Then, he stood in the middle of the chamber and closed his eyes. Its face showed concentration in its purest form - it seemed very determined in whatever it was doing. Unfortunately, his efforts were unrewarded, so he clicked his tongue and left angrily.

The moment he was gone, the wall collapsed anew, from which they both escaped. The armor quickly let them go to writhe on the floor - it would seem that, despite being made of stone, having stood up for so long had caused its injured leg to cramp. Vermillion was about to run off that instant when they heard it.

A brief and restrained whimper coming from the armor. It was clearly suppressing it, but it was too late. Vermillion's heart shook to the core and swore not to be what it once was.

They had heard that voice before. It was embarrassing how fast they recognized it. They really wished they didn't. Though, there was no going back.

They sat on the floor so they could be at the same level as the armor, who flinched. Upon seeing its reaction, Vermillion threw their hands in the air until it calmed down. After that, they took their cape and finished tearing down the end until they were left with a long cloth.

"Your ankle, right?" they asked with too much softness.

Both the armor and them looked at each other for what seemed like years. Somehow - not even they knew - behind those eyes, it appeared as though they both reached an agreement. The armor lightly lifted and lowered its helm in affirmation. Vermillion then tied the cloth to their leg the best they could so it would act as a bandage. It wasn't perfect, but it would work for the time being.

"Can you walk?"

It replied by shrugging and twisting its hand, dissatisfied. Vermillion furrowed their brow - if only they had recognized it earlier...

"I'm sorry."

It gave a simple nod, as if to say 'all is forgiven'. Conversing with it, despite the lack of verbal response, turned out to be quite pleasant. At least they could catch their breath after... whatever it is that just happened. It was then when those words, that warning, came to mind: 'the higher ups'... If he was right, nothing good could come out of that. And despite it all, the armor was the only one who protected them proper, who watched over them, for the first time.

...It never wanted to attack them, did it?

Vermillion decided to grab its arm and pull it over their shoulders as they grabbed its back. If someone knew how Firewall Tower worked, it had to be it. Vertigo could use the days off.

"Okay, hang tight," they asked of it, and it obliged. "On the count of three: One, two..."

Helping it up became an almost impossible effort, provided Vermillion's lower weight and height. However, the armor's left arm never left their shoulders.

"Alright, where are we headed?" they groaned, grabbing its wrist with their free hand.

It pointed towards one of the walls, which came apart into the nothingness. A certain hum emerged on Vermillion's head upon revealing the hole in the wall, without them knowing where it came from, or if they were the only one who heard it - or felt it. They stopped being able to discern many of their senses, anyways. With Vermillion's help, the armor limped until they entered the abyss and the wall was rebuilt behind them. There were no traces left of them, and the conference room became empty once again.

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