

BROKEN BONES a work by tontodechoque

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)* Prithce, 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

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!

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.

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.

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 sun*? It 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...

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.

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.

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

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 deacease 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

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?

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!"

"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

"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.

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

"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..."

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 had 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."

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 filed 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

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

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

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 -