

BROKEN BONES a work by tontodechoque

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 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

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.

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?

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:

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...?"

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 courtesies - 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

"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 appetit!"

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 expert '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."

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

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

"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.

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.

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?

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 themself 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."

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

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.

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 mesure 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.

"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 unlearnt curriculum gets piled up, they don't know where to begin and they get stuck. All I'm doing is guiding

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 it'sy 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:

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 life. 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."

"Verrrrrrmmmmm... Vermicelli."

"No."

"Verrrrrrmmmm, 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. Prithee 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