A Drop Echoes in the Hollow

by andagiiwrites

Summary

Kutone had the high-rise, high-rolling, high life as an executive assistant, but disgrace plummeted her to the depths of modern life's insanity. And she thought she coped well enough, but when ostracization carves a figurative hollow into her, she seeks refuge in the gift bequeathed to her by her Grandpa.

Unfortunately, old habits and hurt die hard, even in her journey to discover her innocence again.
Not Even, Anymore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sleeping around with strangers from the workplace, didn’t feel good anymore. Not that it ever felt good.

Then again, far as Kutone knew, nothing had been good since about a year and a half ago, but she had a knack for finding the bottom beyond rock-bottom. Rain shimmered outside, blinking with the streetlights reflecting up to her balcony window. She was lying in bed, some guy—his name was Nathan, or something like that—above and supposedly “making love” to her limp body. Yet he never lifted his eyes, eagerly watching his own action down below. If he were making any sounds, the rush of cars through the pelting rain muted him—a blessing of silence, Kutone thought, and simultaneously counted the ticks of her clock. He really needed to finish soon—customer service calls in the high-rise offices of Joja Co. started ringing in at eight in the morning, and she needed to catch the 7:15 shuttle leaving from two blocks down the boulevard, at a bus transit center in the innermost parking lot of the local mall.

“Hey, babe?”

She flinched at his rasping voice next to her ear, and then turned, disgusted by the smell of Joja Co. cigarettes and Joja Co. beer on his breath.

“You’re not gonna kiss me?”

She’d be a cold-hearted bitch if she refused him this. Yet, Kutone made no move to turn her head back to him. “It’s only this one night,” she replied.

He stopped. Laid a hand on her cheek and turned her face toward him. The flecks of sweat in his hair glowed, like the winking city lights outside. A thin, shining sheen on his face highlighted the ridges of his brow, contorted in confusion. “That’s not the attitude you had at the bar.”

Cheekiness laced his voice, trying to tease levity into her body. A stale trick. She sighed, shallowly, and pushed up on his chest. “Must have been the drink then.”

“Come on. At least let me finish.”

Yet he pulled even further away, as Kutone sat up. She gathered her disheveled hair—deep violet—over one of her caramel-toned shoulders, and sighed again.

“Was I that bad?”

“It’s not you.” The proper follow-up to that statement would have been, “it’s me,” but Nathan didn’t seem to need the explanation. He dragged his hand through his hair. Groaned. Kutone decided on a different follow-up statement. “Your girlfriend’s gonna wonder where you got to.”

He gaped at her like a boy denied his favorite toy car. “But,” he stuttered, “at the bar. You said. I said I was gonna…”

“You’re not.”

“I’m in love with—!”
“You’re not.” Kutone watched Nathan’s shoulders slump, like a balloon losing all its hot air. Like his colors were graying out. Like he was returning from a dream. She hurt to see him like this, but, as her older coworkers would say, “that’s real life.” She tried to soften her voice. “I’m sorry. You can use the shower. Freshen up a bit.”

He didn’t answer. Dragged himself out of Kutone’s sheets. Gathered his clothes from the floor. Trudged to the bathroom, and closed the door.

The rush of shower water meshed with the whish of cars through the rain. Then, and only then, did Kutone finally press her palms to her face. Tears tugged at the corners of her eyes, but she refused to let them come. She didn’t deserve to cry: Nathan was the third person, in two weeks, that she’d done this to.

Yet all she thought about, as Nathan wordlessly left her apartment, was the number of hours of sleep she could manage to get in before running to the shuttle the next morning.

Not even lunch with the girls was good anymore. Not that lunch with them was ever good.

Lunch at the cafeteria of Joja Co., Zuzu City Branch HQ, was a lot like sitting at a public confessional, especially on Mondays. The Girls circled the catering tables first, chirping the prologues to each of their weekends.

“Oh, my god, you have to hear what happened to me on Friday…”

“Girl, I bet your Friday was nothing like my Saturday!”

“But you’ve got to hear what happened when I went to…!”

They picked out a full lunch. The only full lunch: spongy meatloaf, dry roasted potatoes, watery carrots and broccoli, runny applesauce, and a coffee. All Joja Co. branded. They commented on having a wine or champagne later in the evening, to wash away this “god-awful lunch,” and then they turned against each other.

“Did you hear? Jessica and Nathan had a fight!”

“Yeah, poor thing! She didn’t deserve what Nathan did to her…”

“I heard Nathan met someone at the bar. Someone who works here…”

They picked at their food a little, downed their coffee, and turned to Kutone.

“Do you know, honey?”

“Yeah, Kutone would know! She’s the most knowledgeable out of all of us here!”

“You still need to tell us about that other thing, you scandalous devil, you…”

That other thing. The words physically hurt, and even after a year and a half, the memories made her nauseous. Kutone sighed, grimacing. She traced the rim of her coffee as The Girls watched her, waiting with bated breath, for Kutone’s input. It needed to be a response that lived up to her notoriety, and got The Girls riled up, excited to continue the topic. At the same time, honesty had netted her that massive demotion, after that other thing. And yet, “Call me the Goddess of Scandal, then,” she replied, shrugging. “I think I slept with him.”
A chorus of gasps and “No, you didn’t!” echoed around her. In a sane world, Kutone thought, this would also be the part where she was publicly humiliated. Figuratively crucified. If only it led to her termination.

But she worked in a dimension of insanity. The Girls huddled close, and brought their voices to a whisper.

“Well, Nathan’s hot. You were drunk. And you’re a pretty girl, Kutone.”

“Jessica might need to learn something from you, about keeping her man!”

“But this is Kutone we’re talking about! Nathan’s easy pickings compared to what she had before!”

Kutone downed her coffee. Winced. Joja-brand black always made an acidic flare boil up behind her nose and throat. Then, “You guys are terrible. You’re supposed to be shaming me, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah, shame on you for seducing a taken man, but shame’s no news to you, is it? Besides, that’s real life, right there.”

“Real life,” Kutone echoed. “Sure…”

Not even the Department Exec’s compliments could perk her up anymore. Not that they ever did.

In a sorry emulation of the building’s starling chief merchandise executive, he liked to lean against the left side of Kutone’s cubicle threshold, wrist flopping clumsily over the upper corner. With his arm raised, his shirt and suit jacket pulled up, revealing his beer-hardened gut. It flopped just as oafishly as his wrist, especially when he laughed.

“Kutone, still the best at this after two years!” he roared. His voice against the tk-tk-tk of other cubicle employees at their keyboards—if only Kutone could scratch her ears off. “Here at Joja Co., we love your consistency. Your calls are always efficient, yet welcoming and hospitable—we record them, remember, for quality assurance.”

“I remember, Boss,” she replied, hoping the same efficiency would get him to leave.

“And then the customers call back!” He squinched his face to match his squeezed voice. “I was just talking to Kutone, can I talk to her again? She helped me out so much.” He relaxed his face. “And then your reports, miss, are stellar! It’s difficult to think you’re actually taking notes while in the middle of those excellent calls!”

“I’ve had prior experience.”

“Keep it up, then!”

And now for the acting. Kutone leaned back in her seat, and crossed her legs. Like the femme fatale they think I am, she thought, except instead of skirts, I make pants look sexy. “Boss, no raises, nothing?” She put on her fake coy smile, the one that got Nathan into her bed just last night.

The Exec’s belly bounced as he harrumphed, wiped the grease from his forehead, and lowered his voice. “Kutone, we need to continue seeing these results. I can only talk to the top about it, but I’m not the one who ultimately decides… Besides, you have history.” He waddled closer. “I can at least treat you to dinner and a drink or two?”
Kutone, in her wheeled chair, kicked away from him, and coasted back to her desk. “You said that last month, sir. Guess I’ll just keep waiting.”

He roared again, laughing. “A living she-devil, just like they say up top! Keep up that sense of humor! You’ll be seeing that Administrator position again soon enough!”

Then he waddled away. Kutone stopped spinning in her chair. Relaxed her legs. Sighed. It seemed to her that, no matter how much she sighed, she could never alleviate the pressure in her chest. The blue walls of her cubicle, the blue paint of the department room, the blue neon sign above (“Life’s better with Joja [smiley]”—they all wedged a knobby pressure deep under her rib cage, and the drink, the sex, the girls, the boss, none of them could ever relieve it. That’s why, she figured, she sighed so often.

“I am an Admin, Boss.” Since roughly a year ago, when she’d finally gotten used to the stumble she’d taken, restlessness jostled her chest at around this time. Every afternoon, after the Exec left her cubicle and wobbled off to blow smoke up some other Admin’s ass, at exactly this time when the lull in work stirred that restlessness into a possible fit of crying, a different, warmer, yet nagging memory threatened to surface again.

Dear granddaughter…take this...

She had a memento, the one thing Grandpa Issu left to Kutone when he had last uttered, “Now, let me rest,” locked away in the first drawer of her desk. And, like every stale day when the booze and sex and Girls and compliments didn’t help, she opened the drawer and stared at the sealed envelope inside. An elegant wax seal on a yellowed envelope, the memento called up Grandpa’s voice again and again.

There will come a day when you feel crushed by the burden of modern life…

Real life, Kutone inwardly corrected. This is real life—her current situation, the rumors, the emptiness, were due entirely to herself. But she remembered her Grandpa falling asleep that last time, and with him, the memories and stories of his happy life in some distant country valley. Dad and Mom had never talked much about Grandpa’s life, but Grandpa, with Grandma smiling next to him, had so much to say. They’d talked about vibrant colors beyond blue and gray, weathers beyond smoggy and rainy, and people who loved for longer than just one night, people who knew what “love” meant. They had stories about the sky being higher than the city scrapers, so high up and free that the clouds touched the stars. They talked about the soil in that valley always smelling like fresh rain, and the rain smelling like the wildflowers and seasonal fruits—and that, they would say, was their love.

Kutone had only just started working when Grandpa Issu went to rest. As a younger teenager, work was liberation from school, even if it was just scanning the neighbor’s Joja groceries across a red light. She was generating income. Saving up with a bank account. Paying credit card bills and applying for her driver’s license. Auto insurance. Renter’s insurance. Mom had smiled and said, “My baby girl’s going out into the real world!”

But…that’s it? Work, eat, drink, sleep, repeat? Maybe sometimes people found “love,” but love here in the city deflated Nathan’s shoulders—every man and woman living the night life in the city had seen that image at some point, like a 1g-gold star on their crumpled “Real Life Certificate.” Love, she thought, flickered gold or auburn or red in a cold glass. Love stole the breath of a man and changed it into tobacco smoke. Love iced the surface of a bed and still invited wayward guests. But, “No,” she corrected herself. “Love gave me his world, and then took it away.”

…your bright spirit will fade before a growing emptiness...
“Am I alive?”

So breathless was the question that she couldn’t hear her own voice through her headset, but she felt it. Like cold smoke, it wisped through her hollow chest, and settled at the bottommost pit of her stomach. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt happy. Had she laughed at all in the ten years since Grandpa went to rest? Fallen in love since she started working? Mom wanted a career woman out of her daughter, and she was on that path! Full-time work with benefits, and it was a salaried job! She was affording a high-rise apartment in the city, there was no getting better than that—

“I used to be.”

Yeah, one time, she did laugh. She did love. She once sat in meetings with the men, offered criticisms and suggestions to her own executives—she was the role model career woman marketers made into empowerment posters for young girls. And now…

Her breath quivered. It vibrated in her throat and stung her eyes. Her hand went toward the first drawer of her desk.

*When that happens, my child, you’ll be ready for this gift…*

She broke the seal.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, Stardew Valley writers! My name is andagii, and I've been lurking in this tag for a while on AO3.

I'm uploading this story on another website as well, but I really liked the formatting in AO3 so I'll most likely be slinking around here more often.

Comments, kudos, criticisms, cries of mercy--any noise is better than radio noise. Thanks again!
Stardew Valley

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The heaving drones of the bus engine, along with its bumpy tosses on the mountainside road, dampened any hope of Kutone’s reading, but she battled the motion sickness to read Grandpa’s letter for what she guesstimated as the 394th time.

My dear Kutone,

If you are reading this, then you must be in dire need of a change.

The same thing happened to me, long ago. I’d lost sight of what mattered most in life… real connections with people and nature. So I dropped everything and moved to the place I truly belong.

That place being Stardew Valley, along the southern coast. The place where the sky was so high a person could fly just by looking up. The place where the earth smelled like the rain, and the rain smelled like the flowers. The place where people were humans, and humans knew how to love.

According to Grandpa, anyway, Stardew Valley had given him a new lease on life, and with the title deed inside the envelope, he’d meant to help Kutone start her own reset as well.

She took out and unfolded the deed, this one for only the 2nd time. Breezy Banks Farm. Grandpa Issu had inherited it from his grandpa, and until the night he went to rest, loved the farm to the fullest of his soul.

The first time Kutone had pulled out the deed to the Banks, ecstasy had made her cry with a shriek. That one little scream had set Grandpa’s entire plan into motion, first earning the attention of the Department Exec, then his denial when Kutone had breathlessly murmured, “I quit.” She’d felt a little sorry for her boss as he begged Kutone to reconsider, promising her that raise, that benefit, that reference and that recommendation—and maybe perhaps a chance at your old position again—but Kutone was already packing up. With one large swipe of her arm, she knocked everything off her desk, computer, mouse, and keyboard included. She’d tied her hair into two long tails, breathed deeply, then looked her boss square in his eye. “Take those damages out of my last paycheck.”

She scheduled an end to her apartment lease, donated her suits and dress shirts, then sent a letter to the mayor of Pelican Town. His response, impressively immediate for snail mail, was a hearty welcome, and promised to accommodate Issu’s granddaughter whenever she was ready to start anew in Pelican Town.

Dad and, especially, Mom, had worried relentlessly. Too hasty, they said. Talk it out. Negotiate for that position at your job, just in case. Wise advice, now that Kutone thought about the situation, especially so as she considered the drastic career change. Administration at a major corporation, to farmer. Everyone and their dead grandfathers would call her crazy.

But as she gazed down upon the verdant hills beyond the road’s borders, Kutone clapped back her doubts. So much green! She could see the textures of each tree and shrub from her bus window, and already, the sky peeled further away. Though the fans blasted a cool gale throughout the bus, Kutone clambered up from her seat, and with a heave, pulled down the window. A crisp sea breeze blew in, and for the first time in what felt like her entire life, Kutone smiled from the bottom of her gut.

The bus driver noticed his passenger leaning out the window. “First time in the valley?”
Kutone turned back. “My grandfather used to live here,” she said. “I might have visited once.”

“Oh, once? Shame!” The driver clicked his tongue and shook his head. “Your parents did you a great big wrong on that one. No matter where you come from, Pelican Town always feels like home. I plan to retire there myself!”

Retirement. Joja Co. offered that, Kutone thought. But that meant living and dying with Joja. The thought left a sour taste in her mouth, so she switched her attention back to the view outside her window.

The paved road wound down and around the valley’s forest, growing thicker as the driver slowed the bus’s pace to a leisurely crawl. Around another bend, the forest canopy cleared way for a tunnel, at which point the bus’s announcement called out, Next stop: Pelican Town. Next stop: Pelican Town. End of line. Please take all of your items... Kutone shouldered her pack as the bus again slowed, and pulled close to the curb. The telltale hiss of the bus’s engine prompted her to leave her seat, wave to the driver, and finally, she took her first step into Stardew Valley.

Immediately, with her first breath of valley air, the pressure in Kutone’s chest began to lift like a bedsheet in the wind. The sky seemed so far, just like she remembered from Grandpa Issu’s stories, and with spring blooming in the valley, the verdant foliage nearly blinded her. Dandelions and daffodils grew unfettered along the sides of the dirt path, and the scent of wildflowers seemed to puff everywhere with the sea breeze. Distantly, the crash and pull of the waves synchronized with the rhythm of the sun shimmering on the sea’s surface, visible from the hilly path at the bus stop.

Mesmerized, Kutone began to step forward, until a woman’s voice halted her. “Hey! Little fierce on the daydreaming there, don’t you think?”

A woman with vibrant orange hair waved frantically as she climbed the path. By the time she caught up to Kutone, the wind had gone out of her. “For Yoba’s sake,” she panted, “I can’t—believe—Lewis had me—climb—all this way... I know I’m not that out of shape!”

Kutone bit her lip. This must be one of the villagers of Pelican Town, and a new nervousness had taken root in Kutone’s stomach. She had to make a good impression; that was the first and foremost job of the newcomer. “Were you... Were you looking for me?” Weak, she thought, but she had to start somewhere.

The woman didn’t seem to mind, and with a beaming smile, replied, “Yes! Kutone, right? Issu’s granddaughter moving in to that old farm down the path?”

“That’s me. And...”

“Robin,” she cut in, offering her hand. “The local carpenter. Lewis asked me to fetch you—ooh, nice handshake, Sebby could learn a thing or two from you—while he got things ready for you at the Banks.”

“I really appreciate it, Robin. Thank you.”

“Oh, please, don’t be so formal! Breathe out those newbie jitters! Come on, I’ll show you the way.”

The dirt path descended to cobble, and divided into two paths. One path led to Pelican Town proper. Robin turned the other way, all the while talking about how nice it was to have a farmer back in Stardew Valley, how courageous she thought it was for a young woman to leave her stable job and try something different and new, and how confident she was that Kutone would quickly call Pelican Town home. By this point in their conversation, they had passed a gate, and the sounds of a flowing
river greeted them as they emerged onto a large field. An old cottage, which Kutone swore she remembered from an old storybook, sat a short distance away, but even before she could take a closer look at the building, it was the field that seized Kutone’s awe.

Weeds, stone, rogue trees, and grass as tall as Kutone herself. Everywhere. How long had it been since Grandpa had left this plot again? Not so long all of this would take over, right? Yet, here was the reality of inheriting the plot, facing down Kutone like a snarling beast.

Robin fought back a chuckle. “It’s…definitely overgrown, but I promise you, there’s some good soil underneath all of that. Get a little bit of elbow grease going and you’ll have this farm cleaned up and working in no time!”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence?”

“You’re welcome! Now try to get some color back into your face. The mayor’s inside the farmhouse.”

An older man emerged from the house as Kutone and Robin approached. Though Grandpa had never described the mayor of Pelican Town, the bushy mustache and the beret gave him away, even without Robin’s input. “Mayor Lewis?”

A smile beamed under the mustache. “Correct! And you must be Kutone! Very nice to finally meet in person!” His handshake was firm and eager, like he was about to yank hard on his bright yellow tie instead of shaking Kutone’s hand. “Everyone in town has been asking about you, you see. We don’t get newcomers very often, so you truly are a breath of fresh air in this town. Now, your grandfather’s cottage…”

The veranda stairs creaked as Lewis descended and stood at Kutone’s side. With the shock of the overgrown fields out of the way, however, a fresh new astonishment hit her like a weight to the stomach. One section of the veranda yawned open with a gaping hole, and the wood seemed liable to snap open with one puff of wind. “The house is literally falling apart,” she said, earning a stifled laugh from Robin, and a correcting harrumph from Lewis.

“‘Rustic,’ Kutone,” the mayor said, “It bears its age well.”

“‘Crusty,’ Lewis,” Robin laughed. “No need to hide it.”

“Robin! Show some consideration!”

“That means you agree,” Kutone snorted.

“Certainly not!”

“But I’m not offended. It was an alright pun.”

As Lewis tweaked his mustache, Robin bent over in a gale of laughter. Then, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, she laid a pat on Kutone’s shoulder. “I think we’ll get along just fine.”

“I suppose I’ll have to forgive you, Robin,” Lewis sighed, “since you’ve been helpful in welcoming Kutone to our town. We’ll have to let her go for today though—let the young lady rest. That bus ride must have been long.”

“Fair enough,” Robin replied. “We’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?”

Mayor and carpenter waved back as they turned and left the farm. Except, there was hardly a tired
bone in Kutone’s body. Even in its overgrown state, the plot, with its bridges and rivers, and fields so wide she could hardly see across the land in its entirety, teemed with unseen adventure. She had to see it all, and relive that childhood sense of freedom.

Leaping over stones and fallen logs, she tore through the tall grasses, and crossed the bridges over Breezy Banks. When her tired feet protested further wandering, she pulled off her shoes and socks and dipped her feet into the cool water. And when she finished resting, she left her shoes at the bank and crossed the aged and smoothened bridges, barefoot. In one corner, she found a dilapidated building—no telling what it was.

And in another, a shrine. She peeled away the growth covering the lettering at the bottom.

Grandpa’s shrine.

Whereas birdsong and sea breeze captivated the rest of the land, here, in front of Grandpa’s shrine, the world fell quiet. The memories, in Grandpa’s peaceful and happy drone, came flooding back to Kutone in imperceptible images, worded aromas, and most of all, a sense, tugging at the bottom of her heart, that she would inherit the spirit of those memories soon.

*I just need to work at it.*

Chapter End Notes

Other than Grandpa's letter, I'm trying to adapt the game's dialogue so that it's more of an interpretation from Kutone's perspective. Some events may be recognizable, others...probably not as much.

Any noise is better than radio noise, so send those kudos, comments, criticisms, or cries of mercy my way.

Thanks again!
Stacked together against the cottage door, two packages awaited Kutone the next morning. One, a copious amount of parsnip seeds, courtesy of Mayor Lewis. “Something to get you started,” read the note inside. Spring was parsnip season at Stardew Valley, and though it wasn’t the most profitable crop available, it was the easiest launch to a young woman’s new farming career.

The second smaller package contained an envelope and a new notebook, tags still stuck to its back cover.

Kutone,

Hope you’re safe in the Valley. Still not sure why you decided to take up Pop’s old hobby as your career, but you took whatever action you needed. That’s what matters, and I’m proud of you.

Sent you a new journal. I know you like to take notes on a new job.

Will keep in touch. Stay safe.

“Dad” had signed the note inside. Always the guy who floated with life’s current, unflappable Dad only got upset when high-school Kutone wandered too long into the night without an “I’m okay” text. Even then, while Mom’s waterworks flooded into salty stains on her sleeves and collar, Dad poured himself a port, sipped on it, nodded in approval, and snuck a sip to Kutone. When the acidic-but-smooth flare hit the back of her throat, she visibly cringed, and Dad said, “That’s how it would feel for us if we lost you.”

He’d also left a postscript, alerting Kutone that “Mom is still a little upset,” but added his assurance that “she’ll come around in time.” And the journal was perfect, a russet orange with a snap button latch. According to the same letter, Dad had purposely steered clear of leatherbound, “since you don’t have to impress anyone except yourself.” She carefully folded Dad’s letter into fourths, and along with the title deed to Breezy Banks Farm, tucked it into a pocket on the inside cover. Then, closing her new notebook, she slid it into the back pocket of her jeans.

Now she was ready for her new job.

Gathering her tools, Grandpa’s old tools, from against a dusty corner of the cottage, Kutone ran her fingers down the worn handles and miniscule flecks of rust. Still usable, she thought, and with the clumsy weight of hoe, axe, and pickaxe already straining her wrists, the realization of her new life settled like the moment sunshine warmed her cheeks and cascaded over the Banks.

How was any of this real?

Real, like the afternoon sun blazing high overhead, and though a spring breeze from the rivers kept the farmland cool, Kutone wished for an icy skinny dip in the river. Her arms shook from the six hours of mining, trimming, and tree-felling, but she’d cleared out some of the overgrowth for a patch of usable soil. Lewis’s parsnip seeds were in the ground in neat rows, and with Grandpa’s old watering can, sufficiently watered as well.
She crumpled onto the dirt, and, disregarding her tools clattering behind her, stared up at the sky. “A little elbow grease,” as Robin put it, hardly began restoring the farm. Trees still clumped together with weeds and stinted saplings on each of the farm’s islands, and the leftover hardwood stumps threatened to splinter her old axe. Already, callouses budded on her shaking palms, and the sunlight raised a line of light bumps down both her forearms. *Sun rash,* she grimaced. *Long time, no see.* At least for now, they didn’t itch. Kutone took out and opened her journal, and pulling out the pen nestled in the spine, wrote her first note of the day.

*Pacing—don’t overdo it. Get work gloves and sun protectors.*

Her arms gave out again after the second period. She was seriously that out of shape? Cubicle Hell really *did* do some atrocious things to a woman’s body, after all. At least the new work would force her into a regular workout routine. And, who knew, her squishy 26-year-old body—just starting to threaten its second puberty—might eventually pare down to her teenage sizes again. If not that, at least she’d have nice arms and shoulders.

But that started with slowing down.

Shielding her eyes against the sun, she straightened her back and surveyed the farm once again, noticing for the first time, the mailbox just to the side of her cottage. Its red flag stood up—somehow she already had mail. Whispering encouragement to her worn limbs, Kutone struggled upright, and trudged toward the mailbox.

Inside was another note from Lewis. He’d probably delivered it with Kutone’s packages.

*I hope you rested well!*

*I understand you have much work ahead to get Breezy Banks back in working order, but I want you to join the Pelican Town community as a core member. We’re a small community, but close-knit, and I’d hate to see you remain an outsider due to work overwhelming you.*

*So take some time to walk around and introduce yourself. It’ll be a good start.*

Willfully speak to other people? Kutone sighed—hadn’t she escaped that chore by dropping off the Zuzu City grid? Mindless, pointless small talk that went nowhere except in circles, in a careless imitation of friendship—hadn’t she left that Mobius loop of asinine relations, with end results always a drink too many and another regret in bed? *But maybe…* Kutone turned toward the path leading down to the village. *Maybe it was the people of the city.* Maybe the people of Pelican Town would convince her, no, humans held on to each other longer, and for more reasons than a vapid pretend. Country air tasted fluffy and crisp, unlike the acidic, doughy taste of the city, and maybe, flavored the people differently.

Her arms weren’t going to relax any time soon, anyway.

The last time Kutone had taken people-watching notes, she fancied herself a high school sleuth of character, and voraciously recorded the results of her psychoanalysis into her trusty notebook. Such results included long, detailed bios of her high school peers and teachers, but, just like any other failed high school endeavor, she almost always turned out wrong in her assumptions. Of course, back then, she considered “disheartened” a foreign word, and abhorred the judging eye. If only she hadn’t lost that zeal during college, after undergrad, through Joja…

So when she stared at her notes and her heartbeat went giddy with haughty understanding, Kutone
felt odd. Incredibly odd. Her notes were, for certain, wrong, weren’t they?

Gus – bartender/owner of Stardrop Saloon. Best spaghetti and wine—chef at one point? Saloon financially OK in the countryside?

Lewis – mayor, dedicated, like a second Grandpa Issu. Looks out for everyone. How about himself?

She paused with the point of her pen still on the page, and furrowed her brow with consternation. Just why did she try reading so much into people, anyway? For preparation’s sake, she immediately thought.

Preparation for what?

Robin – female carpenter, vibrant, energetic, always helpful. Friends, maybe?

Friends—in name only, because friends are good for nothing except backstabbing—

Oh. Oh. She took notes, because she was really, truly okay without having another “friend” dig a figurative hook into her back and throw her off a building.

Come off it, she told herself, and scrubbed her knuckles across her stinging eyes. The townspeople will be different. As if to prove the statement to her own doubt, Kutone doubled her pace through town, introducing herself, talking to the residents, and after each interaction, taking notes in her book. With such a small, interconnected community, just as Lewis had hinted, she found herself flipping back to other pages and adding notes to previous entries. Like when she met Maru for the first time, Kutone turned back to Robin’s entry and added a little star, with the note,

In a mixed-race relationship, and has a mixed-race daughter. Like my parents and me.

Other times, her first impressions clouded her judgment. She made a second trip back to the Saloon in the evening, where she noted about Shane,

Rude a.f., like he goes out of his way to be an asshole.

Not that she could say much better about herself. If possible, however, she liked living without the memories of her businesswoman self, or the surly stockers, receivers, and cashiers at every Joja Mart branch she had visited during her golden age, which was why she also avoided crusty George in his creaky wheelchair, preferring sweet-voiced Granny Evelyn and her constant aroma of freshly baked cookies.

But if anything matched the sinking feeling in her stomach like the moment she sighted a Joja Mart branch across the town river, it was the moment she met those of her generation in Pelican Town.

Alex – High school gridball star. He filled out the shoulders and bulk of his letterman jacket well, and his shoes, no doubt a designer brand from the city, were pristine. Kutone smelled him before she saw him, if Alex were nothing but the slick of hardened hair gel and chemically sour cologne. Typical jock.

He stopped her as she, holding her breath, tried to pass, and waving aside her introduction, dubbed her “Farm Girl.” Then, he grinned wide and declared, “You can officially call yourself my first fan, when I go pro.” He smirked at Kutone’s skeptical glower, leading her to later write, Probably has insecurity issues somewhere.

Haley – Prep. Fashion-oriented. Why she chose to wear wedges on Pelican Town’s cobblestone roads, however, Kutone couldn’t guess. But Haley wove around the cobble in practiced strides, and with a wrinkle of her nose, tossed her sun-kissed hair as she passed Kutone. Is clearly looking down on me. Fair enough. None of Kutone’s peers back in Zuzu City ever approved of her flannels or
denim or worn sneakers. They only liked her in her pinstripe pants and blazer, black pumps and white blouse. *Probably has no perception of a world outside of herself.*

**Abigail – Standoffish.** She had a perpetual glum pout to her lip, and though she returned Kutone’s self-introduction with some warmth, pointing out her hair as a lighter shade than Kutone’s, her amicability quickly disappeared. Adopting a distant, wistful tone, she turned in the direction of the Banks. “I always had fun exploring those overgrown fields,” she said, which prompted Kutone to additionally note, *Maybe invite her over as a guide sometime.*

**Sam – Sunshine.** Kutone grimaced at her own note, but what other way could she describe him? Unlike Abigail, regular contentment left an easy smile in his features, and he had no problems maintaining it, either. He talked of music and writing songs and starting bands, but also admitted he’d never finished a major project. *Very open. Free in thought.* He shined a lot like the best businessmen in the city. Kutone hoped he’d never go out.

Sam, she thought, possibly redeemed his generation of Pelican Town residents.

Unfortunately, one person mirrored Kutone’s brand of coldness, the type she’d adopted at the lower-floor offices. It still stuck with her even as she powered through her self-introductions with what others called practiced ease.

**Sebastian – Won’t even say hello.**

Either because of the fringe of dark hair partially covering his sight, or Kutone’s pressing-business “Hello?” as he sauntered past, Sebastian refused to stop for greetings. He stared at the ground, hands in his sweatshirt pocket, and *maybe* cast a small shrug in reply.

She did that type of thing once. At almost every lunch, The Girls asked her about *that other thing* as Kutone stared at the ripples of her acidic Joja coffee, and often got their answer as a shrug, or Kutone excusing herself from the table. Whispers followed her down the corridors of the building, but she kept her eyes on the carpeted floor, on the elevator buttons, on her computer screen.

Anywhere but up, because up meant hope, and Kutone’s hope had died about a year and half ago.

So what had killed Sebastian’s hope? And what would resuscitate it?

She closed her notes for the evening and turned the questions to herself.

**Chapter End Notes**

I really did meet only 12 out of the 28 townspeople on my first day of Stardew Valley. Some of these characters weren’t part of that 12, either.

Any noise is better than radio noise, so send those kudos, comments, criticisms, or cries of mercy my way.

Thanks again!
Mid-spring, a month and a half after Kutone arrives in the valley, at around the time she finishes clearing the overgrowth at Breezy Banks Farm and starts on patches of cauliflower and strawberry, a bark outside her door summons her awake. At first, she rolls over in her sleep and dismisses the barks as figments of her dreams—Dad and Mom never let her have pets, after all, and the apartment spaces of Zuzu City were always too small for the retrievers, huskies, or shepherds Kutone begged to own. Just another five minutes, she negotiates. Just another four minutes.

Then a frantic knocking sounds at her door.

“Kutone! Oh Kutone, I know it’s so early in the morning but I need your help!” Marnie, Kutone identifies. That plump little lady constantly frets over some animal, but surely she doesn’t own a dog on her ranch?

Kutone drags herself out of bed, pulls on a flannel shirt over her pajama shirt, and finally opens the door, to find a great golden dog staring up at her, panting eagerly. A winded Marnie holds him by his collar, and wheezes just as hard as the dog.

Upon seeing Kutone’s dozing expression and kink-bent hair, however, Marnie’s features light up in a smile. “Kutone,” Marnie starts, “I think this poor thing’s a stray—I’ve seen him wandering around outside your farm for a while now and he must need a home, so I thought, maybe you might be interested?”

It’s too early, thinks Kutone, for decisions. But Marnie launches into an anecdote about catching and collaring the big dog, as Kutone stares back into his droopy brown eyes, an expression, she thinks, the poor boy probably never asked for. He drums his tail on the old veranda, in an uncanny echo of her own heartbeat.

And Kutone has no Dad or Mom to tell her “no.” The dog’s fur runs like silk under Kutone’s petting hand, as he closes his mouth and eyes, enjoying the gentle rub under his ears and chin. “I’ve never owned a dog before…”

Marnie, hands pressed together as though in prayer, rattles off reassurances: If you need help training and feeding him, I can help; and Alex has that great big Dusty so I’m sure he knows a thing or two too; Look at him, he’s such a gentle and sweet thing, he loves people so much but I just can’t keep him; He’ll be such a good companion for you here, Kutone, I just know it…

A stray. Who left him on the side of the road, in the middle of the valley? Or did this dog run away from an old home, and stumbled upon the town in his search for food and love? For a stray, his coat practically glows, or maybe the sun shines at the perfect angle on him. Either that, or Marnie and her niece Jas have given him a good brush-down, to prepare him for Kutone’s first impression. Whatever the case, the dog doesn’t care, and after a survey of the open land around him, he makes himself immovable on the veranda, no matter how much Marnie pulls on his collar. Palpitations deep in Kutone’s chest amplify, and stop her from saying “no.”

She says the next word that comes to mind.

“Oki.”
The dog barks back.

“That’s the name of a character who searched for a light.”

He barks again. Twice.

“You think your light is here?”

Marnie releases the dog’s collar, allowing him to stand on his hind legs, prop his front legs on Kutone’s shoulders, and give her a sound series of licks up her cheek. He brings his forepaws back down to the veranda, circles behind Kutone, and sits at her side.

“Well,” Kutone laughs, scrubbing her palm against her wet cheek, “I’m not sure he understands what I’m saying to him, but I think he’s here to stay.”

Marnie, happy to see animal and human bonding so immediately, thanks Kutone for taking Oki in, and with a delighted bounce in her step, leaves through the southern exit of the farm.

Oki never leaves Kutone’s side as she walks between her crops. He drums his wagging tail against her leg, and follows her back into the farmhouse in the evening. As she sits on her floor, in front of the TV, he stretches himself over her lap and presses his head against her shoulder. He negotiates the awkward position again and again, but never detaches himself from Kutone.

His coat smells warm, like spring sun and promises.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes, my writing shifts in style, depending, I think, on the content in that moment. I try to make sure I’m okay with the style change, before I decide to post, so hopefully, this one isn't overly jarring.

Any noise is better than radio noise, so send those kudos, comments, criticisms, or cries of mercy my way.

Thanks again!
Flower Dance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As the end of spring and Kutone’s first three months in the valley approached, she found a guide to all things Pelican Town in Robin, a position the latter happily served for her favorite client. Though they had only one official transaction between them—a work order to restore the Breezy Banks cottage and upgrade the kitchen and bathroom—Kutone visited so often for milk coffee and cakes, and listened to Robin with an attentiveness so different from the rest of her family, that Robin had no reason to not call the city girl her new friend.

It helped, also, that Kutone’s early work on the Banks showed promise. Initially, before working with Kutone, Robin joined the town’s pessimism in the new resident’s ability to restore the Banks. A city girl? Clean up a farm? And with no experience save for the books she read at the local library? But after a survey trip to take measurements of the cottage, Robin happily reported to mom-friends Jodi and Caroline, as well as Marnie at the ranch, that Kutone had not only cleared the overgrowth, but also tended to an increasingly robust harvest. Plus, Kutone smiled more, an effect of valley living that Robin wished her own son would remember.

Over their usual light coffee and snacks, Kutone and Robin finished discussing future expansion plans for the cottage, after which Kutone pulled out a letter she received in the mail. She unfolded it, and flashed its contents toward Robin. “Flower Dance?” Kutone asked, brow raised.

“It’s supposed to be for the youngsters, like you,” she answered. “Pelican Town tradition, been around since probably before Lewis—and also most likely why he can’t bring himself to do away with it.” Robin chuckled and apologetically waved her hand. “Probably also for Haley’s sake too; she loves being crowned Flower Queen.”

“So it’s a social dance no one really wants to do.”

“Try not to say that to Lewis’s face. You’ll break the poor man’s heart. But, yes, none of the boys ever seem enthusiastic about it. Or maybe it’s just Sebby. He hates the suit.”

“You mentioned that name before.”

“Sebastian,” Robin proudly stated, “is my eldest. Have you met yet?” She leaned back in her seat and peered down the corridor. “I could get him now if not, since I am running low on good excuses to get him out of his room.”

Ahead of Robin’s gaze, at the end of the corridor, a shallow set of steps descended into indiscernible darkness. What little light filtering down from hall lights and front room windows barely illuminated the threshold of a door—probably the house’s basement. Recalling her own notes on Sebastian, Kutone mentally added, Poor guy, he has to use the basement as his room?, before she turned to Robin again. “I’ve met him a couple of times. Kind of shy, isn’t he?”

“That’s the nicest way anyone has ever said it.”

“But he still shows up for the dance?”

“If it were up to him, he’d skip it entirely,” Robin sighed. “But it’s hard to say no to Lewis, isn’t it? Plus, skipping out on community events like that, there’s no telling how Demetrius will take it, given their relationship is already—Sorry.”
Strained, Kutone finished. Robin had already dropped a few hints before about the tension in her family, but always backpedaled before she divulged any more. Back in Zuzu City, The Girls would have started their interrogation, “out of concern.” But Kutone shook her head. “No worries, Robin. There’s just some things you can trust only to your closest friends. I’m still a stranger to everyone here.”

Robin cast her eyes down to her mug, as she thumbed the ceramic handle. She forced levity into her apologetic voice. “But don’t let that stop you from asking someone to dance with you! You’re still a woman in your prime; you’ve got to take advantage of tomorrow’s festival.” She furrowed her brow, thinking. “Let’s see… Alex? He might be okay with dancing with a stranger. Oh, but, Haley would throw a fit, wouldn’t she… How about Sam! Sam’s a good guy… I could even suggest you as a partner to Maru and Sebby—!”

“Robin,” Kutone interjected, “Don’t worry too much about me. I’ll make the best of it.”

The Flower Dance, Kutone later wrote to her Dad and Mom, was the dream-come-true of her frilly childhood as a little girl. As spring showed off its last burst of bloom, the Flower Dance applauded and danced and sang praises of the exhibition. Gus from the Stardrop Saloon made food and drink available, and village youth sheepishly donned their dresses and suits for the namesake dance. Kutone longingly watched the white spring dresses swish and flare with each young woman’s step, while chuckling and marveling at the young men in their gaudy suits.

Never could she imagine, however, her own self in the clearing with the others, dancing like all she had to care about was Spring’s approval, and the person holding her hand. Joja Co. HQ had their own ritzy social gatherings at the top of casino hotels, but while Kutone and her favorite night dress had maintained perfect attendance, she arrived to the cold shoulders of her fellow coworkers. This time it’ll be different, she used to tell herself, attempting optimism. This time, I’ll dance and drink and have fun like these gatherings demand!

Yet the gatherings were never different. She learned contentment in her solitude. She learned appreciation for silver linings, like at least no one ever splashed wine on her dress, and at least the food was alright.

The same should go, she figured, with the Flower Dance. She felt Robin’s concerned gaze on her, but smiled and waved in response. Gods, she wished she could at least wear that dress though! She’d let down her hair, put on a flower crown—no matter if she were Flower Queen or not—slip into the white flats of the dancers, and just spin. Spin ‘round like the shape of the sun, the flow of the wind, and lift her arms and extend her fingers to touch the drifting petals as she danced on. And maybe, someone out there could accompany her in that freedom. Someone unafraid of taking of her hand, and willing to step with her rhythm.

There used to be someone like that…

The music ended. The dancers dispersed back into their little groups. With the end of that fantasy, Kutone defaulted to her habits. Gus had a good wine available.

“Damn. She didn’t even try to ask anyone to dance with her.” The cuff links, cummerbund, and bow tie had to come off. Even as Haley continued her final flourish in the dance, the fade of the last note had Alex scrambling to loosen the suit and open his choked airways. Lewis seriously needed to do a resize of the dumb costumes—neither Alex nor the dudes his age were their high school sizes any
longer. As he unbuttoned his cuff links and slung his cummerbund over his shoulder, however, Alex slowed down.

The new girl’s—Farm Girl’s—poise, leaning back against the clearing fence and holding her glass of wine, had such a feeling of unique class that Alex wondered why she hadn’t participated. If he’d known that was the type of girl she was, he doubted he would have rejected her, regardless of Haley already being his dance partner. “Why didn’t she even ask?”

A light jab on his arm directed his attention to Haley, who, with a content smile, adjusted the flower crown over her wavy blonde hair. “Because she’s still a stranger, duh,” she said. “And look at her. No makeup, no dress, not even the right shoes, and that hair—she wasn’t ready for this festival.”

“But she’s from the city. She’s used to stuff like this, isn’t she?”

“Just because she’s from the city doesn’t mean she has better experience, you know.” Haley stopped adjusting the crown, and turned a flabbergasted gaze up at Alex. “You wouldn’t have ditched me if she’d asked, would you?”

Haley’s angry pout had Alex scrambling to take back his thoughts, resulting in an ambivalent, “I dunno.” His attention went back to Farm Girl. “I mean, wouldn’t you want to dance with someone who’s got a different sense of, I dunno, class than we do?”

“Dumbo,” Haley retorted. “I heard she quit her high-pay, high-rise job to come out here. Whatever ‘class’ you see in her isn’t a whole lot of good, if she’s making stupid decisions like that.”

“Aw, Haley,” Alex sighed, “open up your mind a little more. I bet she’s something interesting.” He shook his head, and said again with a touch of wonder, “She didn’t even ask. Damn.”

In Abigail’s mind, she had a good comedy duo in Sam and Sebastian. Due to the fact Sam was always, and inevitably, incredulous of his friend, and the fact the boys played their roles so perfectly, Abigail never worried about missing any part of their conversation. So when she finished changing out of her dress and sauntered back to their corner, she wasn’t surprised to see them at it again. Sam looked like he could pop out his own eyes. This had to be good.

“Your mom asked you to do what?! And you said no?! Man, what’s wrong with you; I would have jumped on that if Robin or my mom asked me to do it!”

Of course, the two constantly had their disagreements, almost like an old married couple if George and Evelyn ever bickered like Sam and Seb. How they saw each other as best friends, Abigail never understood—it’s an Opposite Bro thing was Sam’s explanation—but at least their antics provided nourishment for Abigail’s soul. She hid a cackle and quickly made her way back to the boys.

She arrived just in time for Sebastian’s dour reply: “So if your mother asked you, you’d do this stupid dance with a total stranger?”

“That’s what you don’t get.” Sam cracked his sunny, shit-eating grin, ready to relish his next comment. “That’s a process called ‘making friends,’ Seb. You know, ‘socializing’?”

When Sebastian snapped, his irritation first twitched across his brow. Then, it dripped into an icy low octave in his voice, which he maintained for the duration of his remaining patience. In this case, with Sam nudging him on a topic that hurt the most, Sebastian’s voice threatened to freeze the flowers on the food table. “Excuse me for not being a people-pleaser.”
Sam, blowing a raspberry, shrugged and waved away his friend’s response, then sidled close to throw an arm around Sebastian’s shoulders. “Look at her,” said Sam. “I’d love a chance to get to know someone from the city—someone like me. And she clearly feels like she’s still an outsider, so, y’know, don’t you get a feeling like you wanna help her? Get her more used to the countryside?”

“Nope.”

“Aw, come on, Seb!”

Abigail cut in with a snigger. “Kinda hypocritical of you, isn’t it, Sam? You didn’t bother to ask her, either.”

“Look, I’d already promised Penny I’d dance with her. But you two?” Sam shook his head in mock disappointment. “Abby, you would have wholeheartedly agreed to step out the dance, right?”

“Can’t deny that.”

“And Seb, new girl’s feelings aside, you’ve been saying you wanted to do your mom some kind of favor, right? Close the distance between you and Robin since Demetrius and Maru or something like that?”

Defeat dissolved Sebastian’s annoyance. He rubbed the back of his neck as he stared at the ground. “Yeah,” he sighed. “I said that.”

“Just one little yes from you and it all could have been easily arranged. Plus, bonus points for making the new girl feel welcome. Think about that.”

Sam had won this round. Neither Sebastian or Abigail had a good enough ounce of snark between them to snap back, so both fell silent, until, interestingly, Sebastian opened his mouth. “She’s been getting along with Mom.”

Abigail sat on the grass, crossing her legs. The festivities warbled on behind her, but with the extremely rare occurrence of Sebastian starting a conversation, she dedicated the entirety of her attention to his words. Even Sam went quiet, though Abigail swore she saw a proud tear in the corner of Sam’s eye.

“I guess Mom wanted to help her blend into the community better. Maybe that’s why she asked if me or Maru could be her dance partner.” He slouched back like a deflated balloon. “I really messed this one up, didn’t I?”

“You couldn’t help it,” Abigail replied. “I mean, how were you supposed to know? New girl herself never even asked. And we all know you always want this festival done and over with ASAP. Why bother, right?”

“You’re only highlighting the fact I was a jerk about this.”

“Do you deny it?”

He heaved another deflating sigh. Scratched his head. He seemed to struggle with his answer, but then, “No. I can’t. I never even said hello to her.”

*I never asked, thought Kutone, because I know the answer. She mentally corrected herself. I expect I know the answer: No. Rejection. Ridicule. Running joke.* The point of a social dance was to relegate
one member of the group to the position of “butt of the joke.” Usually that member was the one who hoped for the most out of a social gathering. The one who wanted the fairy tale *I found my true love* ending to their ritzy evening. And for the past nearly two years at Joja Co., Kutone was that member. Too many times she dreamed of a past boyfriend she’d spurned asking for her hand once more, and too many times she ended the evening watching him with a different tittering woman. And then the others gathered around the punch bowl and whispered about her, *she thinks she could have him again, have her position again, cheating skank*…

So she expected she knew the outcome of dreaming too hard at a dance, which was why she confined herself to the farthest corner of the clearing, and refused to ask. Gus’s wine was exquisite, and if Kutone had her way, she would have made off with one or two bottles for herself, just like the old days back in the city. While everyone else went to afterparties or the hotel next door, Kutone would leave the building with two bottles of wine dangling between her fingers in one hand, and her shoes in the other. She would hail a cab, tell him her address, and then stayed quiet until she was in the safe space of her apartment. She kept the lights off and opened her curtains, popped the corks and drank straight from the bottles. The high life. Real life. No one questioned her hangovers the next morning, and in fact, everyone laughed so loudly in her ears they left her with banging headaches for the rest of the day.

For the Flower Dance, however, she applied the lessons from her early mistakes, and limited her wine to just enough for a buzz—the perfect kind of haze to render the clearing’s torches into fuzzy orbs of light. Maybe there were candles, and maybe, she thought through the low hum in her limbs, there was some magic involved too, but the lights reminded her of the rainy reflections against her old city window.

With minimal heartbreak as her result, in Kutone’s mind, she’d successfully survived another social dance. So she rewarded herself by making small talk with the townspeople, remarking—with an ever-increasing wistful twinge—how pretty the dance was, how quaint and refreshing from the city…

The day’s hours rolled into twilight, when Robin, lip turned, stalked to Kutone’s spot and stood with hands on her hips. “Young miss,” Robin began, “I thought I told you to take advantage of this event.”

Kutone blinked through her buzz, confused. “I did,” she replied. “The dance was real pretty, and the food and wine were great.”

Robin’s scathing glare dissolved into sad sympathy. “You worry me, you know.” She leaned against the fence, next to Kutone, and stared up at the twilit sky. “Sometimes, I can tell the valley’s doing you a lot of good. You’re smiling and laughing and joking a lot more. But then other times—like now—you have that same sad look you had when you first got off that bus.”

“Come on, Robin, I’m just a little drunk, aren’t I?” Kutone tried to grin.

Robin wasn’t buying it. “I know a fair bit about people in pain,” she murmured. “Comes with the ‘mom’ job title. So I won’t ask about your life before Stardew Valley. Whatever it was, it’s done its damage, and it’s okay to not talk about it.

“But everyone here, this entire community—we’re all going to accept you. You just have to reach out to us.”

“Reach out…” Allow herself to become vulnerable, and possibly have her feelings made into mincemeat again? She shook her head. “That’s gonna be real hard for me, Robin.”
Before the two women, the elders of Pelican Town had taken up their own version of the Flower Dance, with a few of the earlier dancers also joining the camaraderie. Some continued with their buffet at the food table. Others kept to their cliques. The festivities could almost be called mayhem, but the trees continued to sift their blossom petals onto the villagers below.

One petal landed in Kutone’s drink, and with the consequent ripples came a brief moment of clarity. She pursed her lips, then slowly tilted her glass back and forth. “But you’re right,” she said. “I’ve been through some things. Things that made me think, I didn’t, and would never, belong. Anywhere. I guess I…got the same feeling here too.”

Robin sighed, relieved. “That’s a start,” she said. “Honesty’s your best friend out here.”

Not so back in the city. Honesty got her that nickname—cheating skank!—that reputation, and the exhaustion of grinding through each humiliating day. She spared Robin her dry thoughts, instead turning to a dormant optimism she hadn’t entertained in a while. “You think I can join the dance next year?”

“Join? I think you’ll have everyone falling over each other to ask you for a dance.”

“I can have a dress too?”

“Wouldn’t be a Flower Dance without the dress!”

Kutone chuckled, as she brushed her eyes. “Thanks friend,” she replied. “I needed that.”

Chapter End Notes

Time and seasons in this story pass according to the Julian calendar, but I’ve chosen to not name the months. I wanted to preserve the outside-of-reality feel of the game.

Kutone thinks she had a successful first Flower Dance, but what do you think?

Any noise is better than radio noise, so send those kudos, comments, critiques, and cries of mercy my way. Thanks again!
Past Pierre’s General Store, and across the town’s eastern river, stood the one building Kutone had refused to even acknowledge for the time she’d been in Pelican Town. Its blue panels and blue lighting, and its phony smiling face under the second “j” chilled a bulging hole through Kutone’s stomach, like a waking nightmare. According to the moms of Pelican Town, Joja Mart sold some of its merchandise at cheaper prices than Pierre’s, though they agreed they could do without Joja’s additives, preservatives, trans-fats, or the membership fee. After hearing as much, Kutone preferred her shopping at the rustic—albeit pricey—country shop that Pierre’s provided, since it also kept her far away from certain memories.

If she needed any more reason to avoid the supermarket, however, it came to Pierre’s with what Kutone called the Joja Sneer. The suited pudgy man with the greasy combover—they called him Morris—at least looked the part of the starling Joja employee, to the point he expected a fanfare at his entrance into Pierre’s.

“Pierre!” Morris opened his arms as though welcoming a lost sibling. “Still in the business, I see!” Pierre, with his parted hair and wire-framed glasses, never seemed capable of scolding a fly, but his glare then threatened to burn holes through Morris’s ribs. “No thanks to you, Morris. Can I help you with something?”

“Oh, no, nothing special.” Morris surveyed the customers inside the general store, then kicked the Joja Sneer into high gear. “Pelican Town has just been so accommodating of me and the Mart, so I wanted to repay the kindness with something of my own!”

As Morris dug into his pockets, Pierre’s defiance melted into white defeat.

“Coupons for everyone!” declared Morris, holding a bundle of papers high. “75% off most items at Joja Mart! And if you’re a member, I’ll be happy to make exceptions on certain products!”

The high percentage meant Morris made no profits. His announcement solely targeted Pierre’s clientele. Joja: a pig in the city, and a pig in the country. Kutone turned away with a huff, and continued examining the zippered pockets of the sturdy backpack on Pierre’s counter. While Pelican Town moms and bargain hunters clustered around Morris and thanked him for his generosity, Pierre pressed his hand against his forehead. “I’m doomed, Kutone,” he groused. “There must be some kind of law against this, isn’t there?”

“If there is,” Kutone replied, “Joja’s already bought their way around it.”

The flock, coupons in hand and wishing thanks, left the general store, but Morris hadn’t finished. As Kutone, backpack in hand, turned toward the register, he waved the bundle of coupons in her face. “Young lady!” he laughed, throwing an arm around her shoulders. “Think of this bunch of papers as savings for you! As a farmer in this day and age, you need to think in terms of cost efficiency! Get the most out of investing as little as possible!”
“That’s after the 5,000g for the membership, right?” Kutone sighed. Before Morris could continue, she shook her head and untangled herself from Morris’s grasp. “I pay you a good chunk of money up front, then you send me flimsy papers that may or may not work on the goods I really need, forcing me to wait for sales, and in the meantime, I end up buying crap I don’t actually need. Either way, you’re making profit, due to the membership fee—which will eventually have some kind of renewal fee—and I keep losing money as well as my sense of necessity versus wants.” She swore Morris’s glasses were falling off his face. “I read the initial proposal on the membership program, Morris. I’ll pass. I’m putting my money into the good things this town has to offer.”

“You—!”

“Pierre, I’ll take the bag. Throw in some of the kale seeds too—I had a good harvest with the last batch.”

Morris, shaking, shoved his coupons back into his pocket, and jabbed a threatening finger at Kutone. “Then I hope you understand you’re just dumping money into a dead end! The next time you see me, your farm and your business will be begging me for my help!”

The slammed door broke the bells and knocked over some of his merchandise, but Pierre happily ignored it and exhaled his relief. “You made my day.”

“He’s made of the same rot as my superiors back in the city,” said Kutone. “I’m used to it.”

“You still wouldn’t blame me if I brag about this to Abby and Caroline, would you?”

“I’m just a customer, Pierre, and I know a thing or two about customers making dinner-table-worthy scenes at a retail store.” Kutone shouldered her new pack and bundled the remaining bags of seed in her arms. “I’ll come by again soon.”

Upon her return to the Banks, Oki’s barks indicated a visitor on the farm. With a hurried bounce in her step, Kutone rounded the path to the veranda, to find Mayor Lewis struggling to quiet the golden dog. “Marnie said you were friendly,” he grumbled through shushes.

“You might say ‘excited,’ Mayor,” Kutone replied. “He loves letting me know when we have visitors.”

“Ah, well, friendly boy, he is. Anyhow.” Bashful Lewis harrumphed and tipped his hat. “I was hoping I could show you something today, Kutone.”

Setting her pack and seed on the veranda, Kutone replied with a quick “Of course,” and, after settling Oki down from his excitement, followed the mayor back down the Banks’s eastern path. He was lively in conversation, speaking with a fond crease to his eyes and curl to his mustache, about Issu’s time in Stardew Valley: the burgeoning crops, the teeming rivers, the animals wandering his fields, the lively Saloon, all of those festivals…

Past the bus stop, and around the town’s first corner before Harvey’s clinic, mayor and farmer continued their camaraderie as they strolled past the community park, then the fountain. But when a decrepit clock face set into an equally run-down building came into view through the trees, Lewis fell into a sad silence.

On a far corner of the building’s façade, covered by wild vines, read a sign: Pelican Town Community Center. Cracks and holes flaked across the woodwork, and the windows, missing their glass panes, yawned open as vines curled inside. Weeds crowded around the abandoned planters,
and threatened to overtake the steps in due time.

“This used to be the pride and joy of our town,” Lewis began. “Always bustling.”

There were a few community centers left in the suburbs of Zuzu City. Parents brought their toddlers for preschool, while tweens and younger indulged in extracurricular music, arts, crafts, performances, and other activities as a cure for their boredom, and to satisfy future college application requirements. Those centers in the suburbs couldn’t seem to get their clientele up, either. Eventually, Kutone thought, they’d probably end up like the Pelican Town Community Center. A lost home for lost souls. She could mirror Lewis’s sadness.

“A part of me wants to blame the youngsters,” said Lewis. “TV, computers, phones—they’re only part of the reason why our youth won’t engage with the community. But I’d be an old fool of a mayor if I laid this entirely at their feet. I understand that.”

The corners of Lewis’s eyes crinkled up in a smile. “So I will take what responsibility I can, as mayor—I can at least show you, our newest member of the community, this place we all once loved. Come on in.”

Producing a burnished key from his pocket, Lewis unlocked the front door and ushered Kutone inside. Lonely abandonment permeated even deeper in the community center’s banquet hall. Where planks of flooring had gone missing, shrubs and foliage grew unrestrained through the foundation. A cracked fish tank sat in the far corner, with crusty, crumbled gravel spilling onto the floor. Dust coated the giant fireplace against the far wall, and the smell of ashes mixed with the fibrous aroma of creeping vines gave the building a sense of unspeakable age. With every puff of wind that breezed through the center, the tinkle and ring of chimes echoed through the halls. Someone had probably forgotten them during some bygone community gathering.

Lewis approached the center of the main hall, Kutone behind him. “In my 20 years as mayor of Pelican Town, the decline of this building has been one of my biggest failures.” The mayor sighed. “Now Joja’s hounding me to sell them the land. They want to turn this community center into one of their warehouses.”

She just couldn’t escape the Joja cancer, could she? Kutone bit her lip. “Is that your plan?” If so, she’d consider another relocation.

The mayor surveyed the building, casting a lingering look on each corner of the room. “Call me an old-timer,” he huffed, “or stuck in the past. Clinging to relics.” Dejected, Lewis folded his hands together behind his back, and breathed in the center’s musty air. “I just can’t agree to their terms. But if I hear one more person purchasing one of those infernal memberships, I suppose I’ll have to let this place go.”

So that’s what the 5,000g fee went toward. Bloated Joja, cramming money into its mouth, claimed to give back to the community but instead took away the very center that brought it together. Lewis mentioned “the youth” as part of the problem, but from Kutone’s perspective, the other part was the omnipresence of Joja money.

To think, she had a hand in its expansion. Once again, the weight of her previous life sagged her shoulders. If only she could breathe the life she helped take away, back into the old building.

Lewis’s attention went to a small stone hut in the other corner of the banquet hall. “Vincent and Jas, I suppose,” he said. Then, chuckling, “Nice to see the center getting some use, then.”

The stone bricks came together in a little igloo, topped with a makeshift roof of grass, sticks, and
fallen leaves. Too advanced, for children’s work. When Kutone opened her mouth to voice her opinion, however, a sparkle of light shimmered in the corner. Mouth agape, she scrubbed her wide eyes and blinked. “…Apple?”

Confused Lewis followed Kutone’s gaze, but by the time he turned, the apple blinked out from view. “Apple?” Lewis echoed.

“An apple,” Kutone replied, uncertain. “With little arms and a face…”

The mayor furrowed his brow. “Have you been working too hard, Kutone?”

“Wha—no, there was—it was right there!” She approached the side of the little house, and scanned behind and around it. “Here, by the fireplace!”

“Rats, perhaps?”

To which the apple appeared again behind the mayor, this time hiding its titters with both of its tiny hands.

“There! Lewis, there, behind you!”

And yet again, it disappeared by the time Lewis turned around. He shook his head. “My talk of selling the place must have stressed you out, Kutone. I’m sorry.” Leaving a pat on shocked Kutone’s shoulder, Lewis went on. “Take some time to get to know it, then. I’m sure the building will appreciate a new visitor.”

Commenting on needing lunch, Lewis waved back and left the old community center. His steps dragged as he adjusted his tie, but at the same time, he whistled with contentment.

Kutone couldn’t bring herself to leave right away. A little green apple with an adorable face had appeared in the building. No matter what Lewis assumed, she knew she wasn’t hallucinating. With a sound slap of her cheeks, she regained her composure, and keeping Lewis’s blessing to explore the center in mind, she ventured down the western corridor.

Remnants of old activity continued even in the hallways. Aged, flaky wallpaper peeled off the walls, enmeshed in still more vines. The first room on Kutone’s right appeared to be an old pantry—empty bottles and jars of sauces littered the floor, and empty kegs and barrels lay split open. Bags that once contained potatoes or sugar or flour were nothing more than burlap heaps caked with dirt.

“Nothing here…”

With light steps, in case the creaky floor buckled and caved under her weight, Kutone crept to the next room further down the corridor. An ancient carpet frayed at the threshold and along its edges against the wall. Dilapidated tables, benches, and bookcases littered the room’s corners with dust and splinters. Negotiating the broken shelves and table legs, she lifted one of the fallen shelves, sending a cloud of dust and cobwebs into the musty air as crumbling books fell to the floor. Carefully, she pulled a surviving book from the ground, blowing and wiping away dust to try to make sense of the faded contents.

“Nothing.”

Did this community center really have nothing to offer?

“Something. There has to be something.”
A story, a memory, anything, really, just so Kutone knew her old job hadn’t totally destroyed the place. It came, thankfully, with a chirp calling her from behind. There, in the center of the room, was a bouncing green apple, arms and legs flailing as it hovered in the air. A golden placard glowed next to it, and between its flails, the apple paused long enough to point at the placard.

She set the yellowed and crumbling book on the floor, and leaping back over the rubble, rushed to the little creature, but it faded away as soon as she approached. Only the tablet was left. A tablet whose inscriptions made no sense no matter how long Kutone stared at it, or traced the engravings with her finger. It was a message—she gathered at least that much. But a message regarding what?

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

A restless sleep left Kutone haggard the next morning. Maybe the work really was overwhelming her. Seeing rats as apples—that had to be it. She wanted apple trees on Breezy Banks at some point, anyway. Maybe the idea of that goal manifested too vividly the day before at the community center.

I’ll rest today, she thought. Water the crops so they don’t dry out, then I’ll sleep the rest of the day.

She pulled a fresh shirt over her dark undershirt, then with Oki faithfully at her side, descended her veranda and out into the fields of the Banks. The kale seeds from Pierre’s were already sprouting, and the parsnips were starting to bulge from beneath the soil. At least she’d have a smooth time with crop maintenance for the day.

The red flag on her mailbox stood straight. Probably a note from Lewis asking about her health. “I’ll have to head to town for that one. He wouldn’t believe me otherwise, would he?”

Yet it wasn’t Lewis’s handwriting on the envelope inside Kutone’s mailbox. Elegant calligraphy simply read “Kutone” on the front, with no return address. “Strange,” she murmured, but the contents were even stranger:

My sources tell me you have been poking around the old community center. Pay me a visit. I have information concerning your “rat problem.” Signed M. Rasmodius, supposedly a wizard? Kutone squeezed her eyes shut, blinked a few times, then read the signature again. “M. Rasmodius, Wizard.” Either this person was just as crazy as she had been inside the community center, or…

Or maybe this is for real?

The letter directed Kutone to visit an old tower on the western side of Cindersap Forest. At least it wasn’t far from the Banks. Kutone breathed deep. If this wizard was just another crazy fellow, at least she had the assurance she wasn’t the only one. But if it’s real…

She turned a star-struck gaze to Oki, who cocked his head in utter confusion as she said, “Real magic, Oki. Imagine that.”

Finishing her morning chores on the Banks faster than ever, she purged all thoughts of rest in favor of another childhood dream coming true. In the city, adults actively indulging in things like wizards or magic was almost as taboo as acting out their raunchiest fantasies. Claiming fantasy had roots in reality, however, was even worse, and through elementary, middle, and high school, Kutone’s claims earned her many a disapproving rebuke from her peers. Childish, they’d said. It’s time for you to grow up. But here, in Stardew Valley? The open air pushed her. Go, the countryside said, go find
that adventure. Go find that magic! Go find the things you couldn’t when you were a child with no
dreams beyond the books you read!

She needed no further encouragement. Wizard’s letter in her back pocket, and pack slung over her
shoulder, Kutone took off south toward Cindersap Forest. Keeping Marnie’s ranch to her left, she
veered right when the shores of the nearby lake shimmered against the early afternoon sun. She
circled past the lake’s dock, and followed the lakeside on the west, until the roof of an old stone
tower peeked above the forest canopy. If that wasn’t the wizard tower, then damn what an old silo.
Kutone had no further guesses to the building’s identity.

Stairs wrought from the cliffside led up to the hefty door of the tower. Marnie had said before that the
tower was always locked, yet when Kutone pushed against the heavy planks, the door gave way. A
breeze wafted out from the crack, followed by a voice:

“I've foreseen your arrival. Come in.”

An older fellow by the sound of the voice. Kutone heaved on the door once more, and crept in once
the crack opened enough for her frame. As she slunk in and picked her way between cauldron,
books, and strange sigils on the floor, the door creaked shut behind her. A burst of wind, too strong
for the slow close of the door, swept by her feet, and circled to the voice’s source, cloaked and fitted
with a characteristic pointed hat. The man had his eyes closed, and held an open palm over the large
sigil at his feet. After a brief look of consternation, he lowered his hand, opened his eyes, and glided
to the sigil’s side, facing Kutone.

“Welcome,” he began. “I believe introductions are first in order.” He bowed his head. “I am
Rasmodius. You have no need to know the many titles I carry with that name, but I suspect you
understand the gravitas of my position.”

Bewildered and unnerved by Rasmodius’s formality, Kutone nodded. “And you called me here.”

“Indeed.” The wizard cast his hand over the sigil again, but this time, after a flash, the sigil revealed
one of the apples from community center. Trapped in an orb of light, the little apple squirmed and
chirped angrily, as if protesting its treatment. “Your ‘rat,’ I presume?”

“So, I wasn’t dreaming?”

“Hardly. They call themselves the ‘Junimos,’ and they’re as much of a dream as you standing here
before me.” The wizard dropped his hand back under his cloak. “Strange spirits, these. They’re
picky about who they speak with—they chose you, one so wholly unversed in the elemental arts,
over a learned wizard as myself.”

As the wizard directed his attention back to Kutone, the light faded, and with it, the Junimo
contained inside. “I hardly understand their actions myself, nor why they chose the community center
as their living space, but you have no reason to fear them. I recommend, of course, paying attention
to what they show you.”

What they show me… Kutone pressed a finger to her lips, then at the same time as realization struck
her, snapped her fingers. “In that case, maybe you can make sense of the tablet at the community
center. One of those… Junimo… things… led me to one.”

“A tablet, you say?” The wizard stroked his violet beard, then nodded. “Curious. Wait here.”

She’d barely comprehended the command when the wizard shrunk into a bolt of light and shot out of
one of the tower’s windows. Holy sh… Magic. Real magic. Kutone spun in her spot, trying, with an
excited, childish vigor, to memorize the titles of the books scattered about, the shape of the runes and sigils on the floor, the colors of the potions on the walls, and the pungent mossy odor of the cauldron’s contents. Whatever was going on here in the tower, all of it was real. Could she learn any of this? Where would she start?

“Stardew Valley,” Kutone murmured, “you are so freaking awesome…”

“I’ve found your tablet.”

In the next instant Kutone jumped, the wizard had easily opened the door and glided back inside. As the door swung shut behind him, he stroked his beard again, and took slow, contemplative steps toward his cauldron.

“Quite an obscure language, that. But I’ve managed to decipher it for you. Quote:

“We, the Junimo, are happy to aid you. In return, we ask for gifts of the valley. If you are one with the forest, then you will see the true nature of this scroll.

“End quote. Curious, indeed.”

One with the forest—that couldn’t mean Kutone. The wizard had said the Junimo chose to speak with her, but that had to have been a mistake. “I’ve been one with a concrete jungle for most of my life, so I doubt I’m seeing anything on that scroll.”

“Hm. You think too literally—a symptom of living in said concrete jungle. However…” The wizard cast an increasingly understanding glance over the concoction brewing in his cauldron. “You may be on to something. Come here.”

Taking care to avoid the unraveled scrolls and dog-eared tomes and lexicons, Kutone stepped closer to the cauldron. She wrinkled her nose.

“All locations on this earth,” said the wizard, “are imbued with arcane essence. As dwellers of this space, many of us are predisposed to one essence or another. One attuned to the essence of the river, for instance, may find themselves crushed and suffocating when surrounded by the essence of stone. Or, in another case, a predisposition toward the earth will render another fearful of heights, associated with the essence of sky.

“But then…” The wizard produced a bowl from behind the cauldron, and scooped up a helping of the bright green concoction. “There are rarities among us who are able to learn and imbue themselves with multiple arcane essences. Spiritual beings like the Junimos are able to sense such individuals, and as such, they ask favors of those malleable people, thereby creating yet another bridge between physical and ethereal.”

He handed the full bowl to Kutone. “What do you find yourself most attracted to in nature?”

She had to think about the answer, as she turned the warm and full bowl in her hands. “The sea,” she said. “And night-time, I guess. Stars and water?”

“Receptive, I see. And, another rarity. Not many find themselves predisposed to two essences at the same time, especially such expansive ones as Void and Sea. I imagine you must have felt open, yet corrupt—vulnerable, and yet guarded, during your time in the city.”

“You seem to know better than I do.”

The wizard smirked, then gestured to the bowl in Kutone’s hands. “Baby-fern, moss grub, caramel-
top toadstool, among others—all ingredients from the forest. You may not have been born with the essence of the forest, but we shall now imbue you with it. Drink up.”

Kutone wrinkled her nose again. “Excuse me? But it’s so…green.”

“Yes, the symbolic color of the forest. Different shades of green denote different types of essences, but, that is talk we can reserve for another time. Go on.”

_Not the answer I was looking for_, Kutone internally groaned, but having stepped so deep into this territory, so far out from anything she could ever have imagined from her days in a cubicle, she wasn’t willing to turn back now. _If I die out here in the countryside after drinking some sketchy soup, well, at least it wasn’t at Joja._

With a deep, preparatory breath, she lifted the bowl to her lips. “Bottoms up.”

All of Kutone’s mental strength went into forcing down her immediate gags. It tasted like over-rich and too-warm kale juice, with clumps of wheatgrass, dirt, and spongy mushrooms, so terribly blended Kutone swore she swallowed wet bark, and could scrape dirt off her tongue at the same time.

Did she see whirling images of leaves and full canopies, and redwoods stretching toward the sky while grass and berries and seeds and cones danced around her?

Probably. The world spun around her into a blur, and then plunged into black. She hit the floor, the wizard smirked over her and proclaimed, _It is time, young lady, for your journey to begin_, but never remembered how she got back home.

Most likely, she thought, lying on her veranda, with Oki nosing her flushed cheek, by forest magic.
As spring heated to summer, and the echo of cicadas hummed across the valley, Kutone’s series of to-do lists had only grown in her notebook. On top of her accumulating notes on the townspeople, as well as the Junimos’ requests at the community center, she had also recorded the goals she envisioned for the run-down Breezy Banks Farm. Crops were, of course, her first priority, but Grandpa’s old tools needed serious maintenance before Kutone could attempt plotting out new patches of farmland. Pelican Town’s portly and withdrawn blacksmith, Clint, provided the consultation Kutone needed on her tools, and recommended an upgrade to a copper base as a starter. He required, however, a small fee and the resources to begin the project.

Kutone could find said resources, Clint explained with a guilty grimace, if she headed to the mines past Robin’s house in the mountains. Veins of copper ore were plentiful in the mine’s upper levels, and despite the condition of Grandpa’s pickaxe, easily mined.

Clint failed to mention, however, the slimes, bats, and bugs that angrily assaulted Kutone around every corner. Had Marlon of the Adventurer’s Guild not crossed her path and allowed her to borrow a dull but heavy sword—worthwhile for bashing skulls or imploding gelatinous bodies—her gravestone probably would have read “Fatally bruised by a ball of goo,” or something just as poetically stupid.

Copper ores bagged in hand, though, Kutone, with Marlon’s help, found her way back to the exit, to find twilight descending over Pelican Town.

Marlon scratched at his bristles. “Not quite night, I suppose,” he said in his growling voice. “You’ll still have enough time to make it back to your home. I take it you need no escort from here?”

“None,” Kutone replied, handing back her borrowed sword, and cramming her spoils into her pack. “I’ll stop by the guild to buy a proper sword.”

“You’ll need lessons too, kid. You’ve got the spunk, but hardly the sense or skill. Gil and I could whip you into a proper adventurer.”

They parted at the bridge, Marlon heading east deeper into the mountains, and Kutone west, thinking to take the backwoods road down to the Banks.

With the day fading, however, even the most familiar sights instantly became foreign. Spying a faint red light and tendrils of smoke down by the lakeside, Kutone veered south, keeping Robin’s house to her right. Marlon had mentioned during her impromptu battle lessons, that the mine’s creatures sometimes made it out into the valley. Hopefully she didn’t need to fetch the guild master again.

But she recognized the silhouette against the lake’s shine. No one else in town dressed head to toe in
black, especially in the climbing summer heat, but luckily for Sebastian, night was a reprieve from the blistering daytime.

As Kutone calmed her alertness, she slowed her steps. After only catching glimpses of Sebastian over the spring months, she appreciated the private opportunity to try speaking to him again. With Kutone’s attempts at even greeting him ending in ambivalence, Robin had also tried, futilely, to get proper introductions established between them. Her son, after all, tended to stick with his friends or his lonesome, and if that failed, he quickly disappeared.

His smoke, gentle like baby clouds, dissipated into the night sky. This place, the mountaintop lake at night, was most likely where Sebastian ended up when no one else could find him. It would be best for him, and for Kutone’s standing with him, if she turned and walked away, but she’d never been a sensible woman. “I didn’t realize you were a smoker.”

Sebastian turned, shaken by the sudden address. He stared a long while at Kutone’s face, then with a shrug, relaxed again. “If it bothers you,” he replied, turning back to the lake, “no one asked you to stay.”

“It doesn’t,” said Kutone. “Former city girl here. I’ve secondhand smoked pretty much everything you can imagine.”

An amused “Heh,” came from Sebastian’s direction, possibly from a smirk.

Finally, Kutone thought, some kind of positive reaction. She maintained her distance from him, as she gently went on. “I don’t usually see you around, so, I guess I was a little surprised.”

“Don’t be. I’ve been at this a while.”

The night lit up once more, as the moon crested over the far mountainside. Though moonlight sparkled on the lake’s surface, neither Kutone or Sebastian had anything to say. Again, she thought, this would be the perfect moment to turn and walk away. Maybe leave a “Nice talking to you” or “I’ll see you around another time,” but platitudes, Kutone knew too well, never really shook a body into action. Never really jarred new thoughts or sensations in a body. Impressions were key. So instead of leaving, as a sensible person would, she stayed, focusing not on Sebastian at the lakeside, but cricket song and lapping waves. Cigarette smoke flavored the cool air, and though Kutone never smoked, it almost tasted delicious. Almost.

They still made no further conversation. She didn’t mind. Their overarching quiet tugged on some fond memory deep inside her chest. What had she forgotten?

The other, unfortunately, didn’t feel the same. “I did say,” Sebastian started, “no one asked you to stay. I’m not a conversationalist like Sam.”

It was, she knew, a gentle push asking her to leave. She pushed back, not wholly used to this avoidant kind of back-and-forth. “I don’t mind.” Kutone loosened her pack and sunk to the ground. “I’ll leave soon. Let me rest here for a little?”

He shifted from one foot to the other, sighed, then shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

A night breeze drifted down the mountain, taking Sebastian’s smoke along as it floated across the surface of the lake. For a moment, Kutone’s hair went along with it, until the wind died into ripples and let go of her flyaway bangs. The tug on her memory intensified, as she drew her knees up to her chest. She had no other thoughts running through her head, not even the compulsory urge to find a topic of conversation. Likely because Sebastian himself had already shot down the notion. But,
maybe the night, its air flavored with smoke, had something to do with it. Or her exhaustion, weighing her muscles down like lead, from the mines.

“Something funny?”

She hadn’t realized she was smiling. The moonlight had probably illuminated her features long enough for Sebastian to stare; he glanced away as soon as Kutone looked up. He took a long drag as Kutone shook her head. “It’s peaceful out here,” she murmured. “Quiet.”

“Yeah.” He kept his voice low as well. “One of the good things about the countryside, I guess.”

“Not necessarily the countryside. More like, this moment here. Like everything’s stopped.”

“You like it too?”

Kutone looked up again, this time, maintaining eye contact with him. She nodded, replying, “It’s great,” before she turned her eyes back to the rippling surface of the lake.

He dug his hands into the front pocket of his sweatshirt. “The beach’s even better,” he said. “Out at the pier by Lonely Rock.”

“I bet. With the waves coming in and out.”

“And with no one there. I’d go at night if I could.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“You see how far it is from here.” He craned his head up, staring at the clear sky. “So I wait ‘til it rains. I can stay out there all day.”

“That sounds nice.”

“If you’re into that sort of thing.” Realizing he’d spent his cigarette, he threw it on the ground, scuffed it out with the toe of his shoe, and picked it up again. “Guess I’ll head back, then.”

Kutone stood up as well, brushing her pants down. “Sorry to keep you.”

“ Weirdly enough, I don’t mind it this time.” A faint smile lighted Sebastian’s features as he sauntered past her. After a few steps, however, he stopped, and turned to Kutone again. “You much of a book person?”

“Sure.”

“Genre?”

“Some sci-fi. More fantasy.” She could hear Mom’s Oh Kutone, isn’t it time you graduated that sort of thing? No respectable company will take you seriously with those kinds of hobbies… and gripped her forearm to brace herself for Sebastian’s reply. “Don’t judge me.”

Sebastian appeared to consider Kutone’s words, then replied, “Newest Solarian Chronicles?”

Excitement leapt up her throat and burst out, “Yes! With the wizard and the missing staff, the necromancer in the tower—but the king back home and—and they just made it into a board game, right? With plans in the future for a full tabletop scenario—oh.” She barely caught Sebastian’s wide-eyed stare in the edges of the moonlight above them. “Oh.” Hadn’t she just learned to keep her emotions in check? She exhaled deeply, hoping to blow away her outburst. “I—I haven’t read it yet.
Moved here before I could pick it up from the bookstore.”

To her surprise—and embarrassment—Sebastian chuckled, amused. “Weirdo,” he said.

“I’m aware,” Kutone replied, drawing her arms around herself. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I meant it in the nicest way possible.”

She cast him a baleful expression. “You sure know how to rub salt into an open wound.”

His amusement faded. “Sorry.” An apologetic glumness shadowed his features. “I mean—I should have said—because it was kinda cu—no. Sorry. Just sorry.”

Hand pressed over his face, he marched further away from Kutone, equally downcast by the sudden sour tone. But then, he stopped again, inhaled deeply, and tried one more time. “I was trying to say, I have the book. You can borrow it, if you want.”

She turned sharply in her spot. “You’re sure?”

“Just don’t catch me on a bad day.” He raised his hand. “Don’t be a stranger.”

“Same to you.”

As Sebastian stalked away into the night, Kutone mentally revised her notes—he almost said I was cute?—and shook her head, denying the prickly warmth in her cheeks with a long breath. Honestly, good thing he stopped himself, because Kutone had no idea how to deal with the innocent confusion poking at the seams of her guarded conscience. She tingled in an almost-foreign way, like her body relived a past memory to which she had no access—no, she rejected her own access.

Because, without that access, without those good feelings her body insisted it remembered, Kutone kept herself safe.

She picked up and shouldered her pack, and stood for a while longer at the silent lakeside. Around her, cigarette smoke lingered, and distantly, a different memory spoke to her.

Am I alive?

For the first time since taking on Grandpa Issu’s farm, since dropping Zuzu City for Stardew Valley, she responded to herself.

“I wonder...”
Sun Rash

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ghost stories, for some reason, always propelled Kutone into action. People familiar with her behavior said she moved out of fear. Kutone said sheer fascination.

So when she read a story at the library about an old mariner’s ghost that appeared only on rainy days at the far eastern shore of Pelican Town, a distinct need to see this ghost for herself had overwhelmed her. After all, her early days in Stardew Valley already exposed her to wizards and forest spirits. Ghosts of marooned sailors weren’t too far off from either of those phenomena, and she needed to see more of the mysticism the valley provided.

They took her away from her old life. High life. Real life. Magic and fairies and ghosts were all so not real, but she lived in a different real now, and needed more of it.

To her dismay, however, the bridge leading to the eastern shore had snapped and disappeared underwater. Repairing it required some extra resources she hadn’t on hand, but Kutone was determined.

Over a few days, in between maintaining her summer crops and mingling with the townspeople, she gathered the wood and tools she needed, and on an open, early summer day, made the hike back down to the beach. With her recently-established experience in woodworking, thanks to Robin, building a bridge should be no problem, right? The only thing Elliot in his seaside shack would have to forgive was the racket of sawing, hammering, and thunking of wooden planks falling flat. Luckily, the sand absorbed most of the sound.

Yet, her progress slowed as the sun climbed higher, and the heat mounted. Her hair stuck to her face and neck as sweat drenched her entire body.

Unfortunately, a beach visitor noticed. “Hey Farm Girl!”

Only one person in the entire village called Kutone that. And the smell of the sea now carried wafts of cologne and hair gel. She tried to keep her voice peppy as she looked up from her work. “Alex,” she started, “nice to see you.”

“How right back at you. Whatcha workin’ on?”

“A bridge,” Kutone replied. “This heat’s killing me, though.”

Alex tossed his gridball in the air, adding a perfect spiral as it sailed up. “Well, that’s what happens when you wear those long sleeves.”

“You’re one to talk, wearing that jacket. And these aren’t sleeves—they’re gloves.” She pulled up the sleeves of her t-shirt, revealing the ends to thin, arm-length gloves. “I get sun rash something awful if I’m out too long.”
“Sun rash? So, you’re basically—like—allergic, to the sun?”

Now she really wasn’t going to hear the end of it. “Yes, basically.” Adjusting the thick work gloves over her sun protectors, she set back to the bridge, expecting at any moment, an ignorant reply.

But instead, “Man, I couldn’t imagine.” Oddly sympathetic. He crouched next to Kutone. “Does it itch bad? I could run over to Harvey’s and get you something for it.”

“No need. It doesn’t itch, and as long as I block out the sun, I’ll be fine.” She slowed her work again. “Thanks though. Really.”

Alex grinned back. “We all take care of each other in this town. Just doing my job.” He scanned the half-repaired bridge. “Need some help? You finish faster, and you get out the sun quicker.”

“If you’re down for it. You’ll work up a hell of a sweat though.”

“Don’t worry about it!” Alex pulled off his jacket, carefully folded it, and laid it on top of one of Kutone’s smoothened planks. He dug his gridball firmly into the sand next to his jacket. “Heavy lifting in the sand? I can’t think of a better workout.”

She’d given him, Kutone realized, far too little credit. Alex gave no complaints as they tag-teamed on the bridge repair. Though Kutone had no problems with the heavy lifting—farm work over the past months had toned out her arms and shoulders—having a capable person to help, like Alex, whose muscles had functions beyond looking good, made the work go three times faster. Early afternoon set in as the two made the final adjustments to the bridge, and with it bearing both Alex’s and Kutone’s weights at the same time, they declared the project a success and plopped down in the sand.

“Good workout there,” said Alex, tugging on his shirt. Sweat dripped down his face and dampened his shirt. “You’re a lot stronger than you let on.”

“Well,” Kutone replied, “with my work being what it is, I have to be.”

“Must be nice. Working outside all day, doing all of that lifting and squatting—trust me, you’ll have a great build by the end of the summer. And that nice tan you got from spring—it’ll get even better.”

Kutone chuckled. “This is my natural color, thank you.”

Alex stared again. He shook his head, trying to snap out of his reverie. “Damn,” he said. “That’s right. Sorry. I meant—well—I didn’t mean to say—Geez, I really messed that one up, didn’t I?”

“Mm-hm. Just don’t comment on the color of a woman’s skin, Alex. You have to tell her you appreciate her natural beauty.”

“Yeah… You’re right.”

He almost sounded breathless, and wore a frighteningly familiar expression: lost in a dream, the Look other boys and girls got after they had a drink or two and stared too long at—. Kutone snapped her fingers in front of Alex’s face, earning a bewildered jump. “Don’t tell me you’re tired.”

Alex leapt to his feet. “What, me? You’ll have to try another time.” Scooping up his gridball, he gave it a few experimental spins, then gestured toward the far end of the beach. “Go long, Kutone.”

Her name? Alex actually said her name, after months of Farm Girl—what the hell?—“Excuse me?”

As if her name were the most natural word in his vocabulary, Alex spent no time on the shift.
“You’re not catching my ball if you just sit there.” Maybe he just didn’t notice it himself. “Go long!”

In the time Kutone scrambled to her feet and kicked up sand in her dash to the far side of the beach, Alex had already thrown the ball. She’d never seen a gridball thrown so perfectly horizontal, and spiraling so smoothly. She could almost see the arc Alex must have envisioned, and barely made it to the point the ball meant to land.

The ball slapped in her hand, bounced up, and landed behind her in the sand. Though she remembered only passing P.E. with participation points, she still sighed at herself, and wrung her hand as Alex ran to meet her.

“Hey, nice try,” he said, picking up his ball again. “You gotta like…scoop it in toward you. It’s not an easy ball to hold, y’know.”

Kutone stared at her hands, then nodded to Alex’s. “My hands are half the size of yours. So if it’s not easy for you, why would you think it’s possible for me?”

“It’s all about movement, my friend.” Alex laughed at Kutone’s pout, then turned to the sea again. He expertly tossed the ball as he went on. “The ball’s movement, the wind’s movement, the players’ movement—kinda like life, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” said Kutone. “But I think that applies to you more than anyone else.”

Alex beamed. “You got that right. My life’s gonna move toward a professional gridball career.” Bringing the ball back, preparing for another smooth throw, he pointed west toward the hilly horizon. A commanding pose, like he already had a team behind him waiting for his directives. “I’ll be the first from Stardew Valley to go pro.”

Pro sports? Who knew that a quiet valley town could give birth to such lofty ambitions? And unlike other times, Alex’s usual arrogance was fading into absence. It was a different air—confidence, Kutone thought. And a strong conviction. She remembered that kind of spirit only in her fellow fledgling workforce newbies, and a handful of executives that never forgot their sense of purpose. Couldn’t, really. Upward movement out there came down to putting in overtime beyond overtime, and somehow outshining everyone else on the same playing field. Rewards in the city came from making everyone else look like crap. While here, in the valley, the only person Alex had to surpass, was himself.

Kutone mentally revised her notes again. Her first impressions of the villagers contained a taint, an infection of her shadows from the city. “How do your chances look?”

“Take a guess,” said Alex, grinning. “I led my high school team to the regional playoffs, y’know. Recruiters see that sort of thing.”

“I guess your chances are pretty fair then.”

“Understatement of the year! Long as I get stronger and faster, they’ll happily give me a spot on the Zuzu City Tunnelers—just you wait!”

“Zuzu City…” It struck her a lot harder than it should. Why did the villagers crave the city? What did they know about it, that Kutone had failed to see? She shook her head—she had no benefits in chasing those threadbare fringes of her memories. Besides, Alex’s dreams shined like the sun over them. Maybe, she thought, he could run circles around the city’s shadows. Pass himself and his brilliant confidence from pipe dreams into reality. “I believe in you,” she said with a smile. Absently, she rubbed a hand down her covered forearm. “You’ll make it.”
For the first time, Alex fumbled the ball. It tumbled through the air and landed between him and Kutone. He stared again with that breathless look. “Thanks,” he muttered. “I’ll remember that, Kutone.”

Her name again. Was he sick? He crouched to pick up his ball, as Kutone lifted a hand to tap his shoulder, to try to eke an answer from his usual bluster, then eerily absent. This time, however, he stayed squatting. Cleared his throat. Breathed. Then as though hit by a firecracker, he shot up to his feet. Kutone withdrew her hand. “We gotta get you out of the sun!” Alex exclaimed, running to his jacket. “Come on, I’ll treat you to some ice cream too! Fresh stuff, made from Marnie’s cows’ milk!”

His eager, but gentle, tug on her arm immediately hushed Kutone’s protest. He didn’t need to know about her slight lactose intolerance, did he? Not that she could ever say no to ice cream offered with a smile, either, especially homemade ice cream. Not that that mattered either—she enjoyed sweet milk products a little too much, as Robin quickly came to understand between their lightened coffees and pudding desserts.

Plus, it was free ice cream. Even though the rash down her arms had ignited into a terrible itch, she couldn’t say no to a thought so sunny.

Chapter End Notes

Alex is a lot of fun to write. This does, of course, apply to Sebastian as well (he's an exercise in minimalism), but trying to illustrate the line between arrogance and confidence was an extremely fun challenge, and something I'm looking forward to doing more in the chapters he appears in.

Any noise is better than radio noise, so send those kudos, comments, critiques, and cries of mercy my way. And thank you to everyone who's done so, so far.
Pelican Town apparently hosted an annual luau party, according to the invitation Mayor Lewis sent in the mail. Though casual in name, the highlight of the event included the regional governor’s attendance, and his tasting of the town’s potluck soup. “Bring something good to contribute!” the letter closed. “And be on your best behavior!” With town funding a constant source of gray hairs for Lewis, the governor’s attendance undoubtedly weighed an intense pressure on Lewis’s shoulders.

Yet…

From her seat on the farmhouse’s wooden floor, in an unlit corner of her room directly across from the kitchen, Kutone glanced up from the invitation to Oki, sniffing the kitchen floor. “If I don’t go today,” she said, “there’s no behavior to make the best of, is there?”

The dog didn’t seem to hear, and continued sniffing. His owner sighed and stared at the invitation again.

Luaus and luau-themed parties—at least the thought of them—left a sour taste roiling in the back of Kutone’s throat. Her body, she thought, hadn’t recovered from her old overdose of Summer in a Cup, made with Joja-brand coconut rum. At least, it was called coconut rum, but it tasted more like rubbing alcohol mixed with water and the faintest splash of coconut. While upstairs enjoyed their summer quarter catering tables and traveling bars, Kutone’s department had taken their sad drinks, hoping to somehow complement them with the myriad chips and salsas everyone else decided to bring. Someone, Kutone vaguely remembered, had promised to bring rotisserie pork and chicken, but ended up bringing canned pineapple instead. For the drinks.

Oki lifted his head from the floor, and after a bound and slide, coasted into Kutone's open arms. He gratefully accepted his facial rubbing.

“What kinds of things do you worry about in your day, boy?” Kutone tried staring into Oki’s brown eyes. “I refill your water every day, and Pierre’s stocked the store with good food for you. So you couldn’t be worried about food, right?”

Her wristwatch ticked to 9 o’clock, AM. Mayor Lewis had probably launched the opening ceremony for the luau. Kutone moved her rubbing up and underneath Oki’s floppy ears.

“Did anyone ever laugh at you for your eyes? All sad and droopy, like you’re always crying about something?”

Her old coworkers never laughed at her, but they always wanted to touch her. How did you do it? They’d never seen such deep violet hair. Never seen such a beautiful natural tan. Was she sure it was 100% natural? Did she enhance her natural skin color with a lotion, or did she go to a salon? And were those eyelashes naturally long, and did her eyes naturally taper up at the corners, or did she work makeup magic? They just had to keep examining her, especially at the parties and gatherings her department was invited to. Touching her new dress, touching her bag, touching her hair, her shoulders. How did you do it?

Really, they were asking about something else—someone else, without saying his name, of course, a someone who kept his distance as far from Kutone as possible, and yet snuck desperate, apologetic
glances in her direction. No one else noticed, because she possessed the glaring notoriety they should have shared together, like a symbol burned into her chest. So she funneled that unwanted attention toward herself, but she knew he kept staring, with the same sad eyes as Oki before her.

“Maybe I should have been a dog,” murmured Kutone, lightening her rubs. Oki whined and nudged his face into her hands again. “Then I might have liked people giving me that type of attention.”

She tried owning it. Skimmed down the number of words she spoke, adopted perpetual apathy in her slouch and speech, and left the rest of her details a mystery. She became a cornerstone of infamy, a centerpiece of her peers’ inflamed whispers, the fantasy of too many drunk fools and romantics—and she was still so goddamn lonely.

Stop, she told herself. Stop letting your mind go back there. You’re in Stardew Valley, on a farm, away from all of that—you’re a new person.

“A new person, huh?” This time, she held Oki’s face between her hands. “What do you think, Oki?”

A bird chirped outside. Oki, waving his tail, lifted his face away and barked at the window.

Insightful. With a snort, Kutone read the letter once again. An annual potluck worthy of the governor’s attention—that meant a contribution had to be of the highest quality. She shook her head, and raked her fingers through her too-long bangs. “I don’t have anything good enough.”

Like most things in life, huh?

Not good enough for a promotion. Not good enough for even a raise. Good enough to negotiate an early termination, maybe. But not good enough for a potluck contribution. Only really good enough to sleep with, but that’s something everyone and their grandmothers were good enough to do. She wondered what the other villagers had brought to the pot.

Marnie—most likely her cows’ best milk.

Caroline—she said something about having a small potato garden.

Willy—fish, for sure, and his best catch too.

Lewis? He kept a planter outside his manor. Probably some herbs.

Robin—the mountain was home to fresh mushrooms. Definitely that.

And Gus—hopefully one of his wines.

“So maybe, it turned into something of a seafood chowder.” Appetizing in theory. She’d have to see it at the festival, down at the beach, to see if she was correct.

But if they found out she hadn’t brought anything, or worse, brought something not good enough—the possible humiliation made Kutone tuck her knees close. “Maybe next year, when I’m good enough,” she whispered.

She needed something to do, something to take her away from these thoughts. Oki barked again, as he plodded to the door and scratched on the wood.

“Yeah, that bathhouse opened up, right?” An earthquake at the beginning of summer had taken out a part of the northernmost cliffside, clearing a path further up the mountain. The waters apparently welled from a natural spring, and thanks to the lava caverns deep in the mines, maintained the perfect
temperature for a bath.

And with the villagers down at the beach, a visitor could have the entire bath for herself. Perfect. She gathered her bathing supplies—towel, washcloth, soap, and a change of clothes—then switched her underwear for a bikini. “What about you, Oki?” she asked, straightening her clothes over her swimwear and tightening her hair into a high ponytail. “You want a bath?”

Annoyance trimmed Oki’s sharp yip. Kutone laughed.

“But you’ll need it at some point. Girls like their boys smelling good.”

She spared him the bath-talk torture, however, and opened the door to let Oki into the summery outside. The house, after all, was unfortunately without air conditioning, and Oki enjoyed his naps on the veranda. Assuring her friend she’d be back in a few hours, she adjusted her sandals and followed the back road up the mountain.

A steady drumming echoed up the valley, and though it had no discernible melody through the muffler of the mountainside trees, the beat reverberated through Kutone’s entire body, and intensified, when she finally reached the bathhouse.

Music, she realized, from the party at the beach.

She opened the door to the bathhouse, and stepped into the women’s locker room. The walls dampened the drumming again, and with it, her guilt. Then again, she thought as she lathered up her hair in the shower stalls, no one had come looking for her at the Banks. Good, right? That meant the villagers were all enjoying themselves, without a care in the world. Moving to the rhythm of their music and waiting for the soup to finish cooking.

Suds rolled off her shoulders as Kutone corrected herself: seafood chowder. With Willy’s fish, Marnie’s milk, and maybe some of Robin’s mushrooms. She smiled as she rinsed and wrung her hair, then brushed it out in front of the spa’s mirror. Eyes trained down on the sodden, tangled ends, she thanked the bathhouse’s steam for at least partially clouding her image. Good riddance.

With a glum snort, she raked her brush through her hair.

Until it caught on one of those unreasonable tangles, and catapulted from her hand. As the wood handle hit the tile with an echoing clatter, Kutone sighed, and turned her thoughts to the luau again. Maybe someone threw in oysters and clams. A little bit of hot sauce and cheese too.

For a long while, she stared at the brush on the floor, her body too heavy with thoughts to rise from its seat on the stool.

But finally, after pinning her hair up, she descended the locker room steps into the spring below. Steam hung around the room like a thick, dewy curtain, but the blanketing warmth was already melting down the tension in Kutone’s shoulders. She stepped into the water, until it came up to her waist, then sat down on one of the underwater protrusions. Water up to her neck, she rested the back of her head against the edge of the floor. Relaxed.

I could fall asleep…

The lulling bubble of spring water flowing into the pool brought old images to her memory. Like her old bathroom back at the apartment, only just roomy enough for one person and her significant other. And the tub, cold and ceramic, and always plotting an accident with its slippery floor. She’d never
run baths back then. They always ended up cold, like the tub itself, and the stillness had made Kutone think. Numbers and topic sentences, the snippy tone of that one caller and a resigned longing for the burn of a drink or two or too many—those were all that permeated Kutone’s thoughts back then.

And now, she thought about people. People dancing and eating down by the beach. People who smiled and greeted each other whenever they passed in town. People who welcomed her into their homes and sat her down for a coffee or tea and maybe some cookies. People who saw the overgrowth on the Banks disappear, and congratulated Kutone on her progress. People, Kutone thought, who were all so good to each other, while she—

She tasted salt in the spring water. Her eyes stung. With wet fingertips, she rubbed her eyes, then slapped both of her cheeks. “It’s on me,” she said, palms still pressed to her face. “I have to be good enough.”

The water, she decided, was maybe too warm. It teased her eyes too much.

Hair down and sweeping against her back in the slight summer breeze, Kutone, after a long lie-down on the spa’s rooftop sun chairs, trudged her way back down the mountain. By the time she saw the light posts of Breezy Banks, the sun had already set and night, descended. The music had died, so the party, she thought, was long over. “That’s fine,” she told herself. “It was my decision. I knew I couldn’t contribute anything. So there was no use to my being there.”

She still mentally apologized to everyone, if they’d noticed her absence. Hopefully they didn’t.

As she meandered past the sprouting summer crops, and closer toward the light at her doorstep, Oki barked. Twice. Then, voices.

“Aww, poochy poo, what’s the barking for? Is your mommy home yet?”

“I’m pretty sure he has a name…”

Oki barked again.

“Oh, he’s such a big happy guy—maybe we should get one for the house! You could take him out for walks, and Maru can bathe him!”

“I can hear your thinly veiled excuses, Mother. Nice try.”

Robin and Sebastian? All the way out here, this late? Kutone sped her steps until she rounded the last corner. Sure enough, she had two visitors on her veranda. Robin sat next to Oki, and gently rubbed the dog under his chin, while Sebastian, hands in his front pocket, leaned against one of the veranda’s posts.

Noticing Kutone emerge into the light, he quickly stepped away. “Hey,” he started, voice trailing off. He stared with gradually widening eyes, though Kutone had no idea what elicited his reaction. “Uh…”

Robin, in stark contrast to Sebastian’s faltering tone, rose from her seat with a vehement pout. “Look who it is!” she snorted. “And about time, too!”

Kutone shifted her gaze between the two. “You weren’t looking for me, were you?”
“Well, when I realized you missed the luau in its entirety, that’s exactly what we were doing.” Robin lifted a bag in her hand. “The soup was pretty good this year, so we didn’t want you to miss out.”

“Sorry,” Kutone replied, shifting uneasily. “Today—today just wasn’t…” She sighed, reminding herself they probably didn’t need, much less care about, her reasons. “I just wasn’t feeling too good today. So I freshened up at the spa a little.”

The bag relaxed in Robin’s hand, as she watched Kutone’s shoulders sag. “We all have our off-days,” she finally replied. “I’m sorry yours had to be today.” Handing the bag to Kutone, Robin sparked some cheer back into her voice. “Lewis panicked his head off when he noticed you weren’t around, you know. Worried himself sick that the governor would notice. But of course, the old codger had no idea.”

Kutone could barely smile. “I’ll have to apologize to Lewis tomorrow, then.”

“Better sooner than later,” Robin agreed. “But first, get some rest. He’d panic even more if he found you out of commission. I would too.”

“Thanks, Robin. Sebastian.”

After one last loving pet for Oki, Robin waved back and set off down the path. While at first, Sebastian followed, he stopped after a few steps. Turned around. Seemed to seriously contemplate his next move, then walked back. “Hey,” he said again. “Kutone.”

His voice failed, rendering her name into a whisper instead of a statement. He had her attention, though. She looked up from Oki nuzzling her hand.

Sebastian wore a complicated expression as he watched Kutone, like he was trying to make sense of two totally different conundrums at the same time. Then, “Don’t feel bad about today.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “I won’t.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Sorry?”

“Whatever it is you’re thinking about. You don’t have to tell me.”

He was probably just saying whatever came to mind. Platitudes. This time, they were nice to hear. “It’s all a bit complicated anyway,” she said. “So… thanks.”

“No problem.” He rubbed the back of his neck, and cast glances back over his shoulder to his mother receding east. He had a clean moment to leave, Kutone thought, but he lingered, continuing, “Did you enjoy yourself, at least?”

Eyes down. Voice soft. Fidgeting. If talking to her made him that uncomfortable, he really didn’t need to stay. “I did,” Kutone said. Efficient, civil replies always cued people to go away. “It’s at the perfect temperature.”

“It’s sad,” said Sebastian. “I don’t actually know what it’s like.”

“You don’t seem like a public spa type of person.”

“You’re right.”

Done. Conversation over. She just wanted to retreat under her covers. But he still lingered, even as
an expectant silence crept into the conversation. After a deep, preparatory breath, Sebastian dropped his hand from his neck, and turned a small frown to Kutone. “You’re really quiet today.”

“Like I said—it’s not my day.”

“I’ll—listen.” He shrugged at Kutone’s raised brow. “It’s just—you’re not yourself.”

**Based on what, exactly, do you know about me?** she almost shot back, but she spared Sebastian her ire. Despite his obvious discomfort, he allowed worry to supersede his own feelings, though he’d probably never admit it himself. And this, to Kutone’s understanding of Robin’s eldest, struck her as terribly uncharacteristic. Maybe he presented himself as an available listening ear only because his mother called Kutone a friend. And he’d do the same, Kutone imagined, for Sam and Abigail, if they ever needed his support. But certainly not because of a nearly non-existent acquaintanceship he shared with Kutone.

Unless, of course, Sebastian really was that nice of a boy.

*How cute*, she thought, and the ghost of a smile turned up the corners of her lips. “I’m fine,” she replied. “Sorry for worrying you.”

“Not me,” Sebastian huffed. “My mother.”

“I’m sure she’ll be happy to know her son cares so much.”

“Hey…”

Fireflies flickered between them, and the hushing flow of the farm’s rivers became the percussion to cricket song, as Kutone and Sebastian shared a light chuckle. Then Sebastian, still keeping a level gaze on Kutone, softly spoke again. “I think… I’d be okay with getting to know you better.”

“Robin hasn’t told you enough?”

“No. You don’t ever look so sad when you’re with her.” He frowned again, seemingly confused by his own words. “At least, when I listen in, you don’t sound the way you looked earlier. That’s… new to me.”

He paid closer attention than Kutone initially credited him. Another striking surprise, considering his usual apathy. “Then I’ll have to stop by your room to say hi,” she noted, "whenever I visit Robin.”

“You haven’t come by for that book yet, so, yeah, that might be nice.”

“Only ‘might,’ huh? I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

“You’re okay.” Whatever the hell that meant, Sebastian gave Kutone no chance to ask, as he turned to leave again. “Your hair down,” he suddenly added, “it’s different.”

He was the type, Kutone conceded, who set himself up for a good tease. “Informative. What kind of different?”

He shrugged, replying in a murmur, “The good kind, I guess.” He strode off down the path, waving back without looking. "See you soon, maybe."

In the moments after he left, as the fireflies continued their lights show between her crops, Kutone sat on the front steps, Oki dozing next to her. Her mind had gone totally blank, like the spa’s warmth was still melting her thoughts. As she stared at the summer night sky, she tried collecting the little
blips as they sailed through her head.

Not good enough—yeah, she remembered reflecting on that. And How did you do it? But, It’s not your fault quickly overshadowed the lines of her reasoning. Like magic words. And Sebastian never asked for further details—You don’t have to tell me. How fresh. How new, to have someone who sounded like they cared, not try to mine her thoughts and secrets.

She could like that type of quiet consideration. And she could like the offhand compliments: the good kind of different, and being just okay with getting to know her better. Cautious magic words.

She had an appetite again. Taking out Robin’s soup canister from the bag, she unscrewed the cap, and held the warm canister between her palms as she relished the scent. “Seafood chowder,” she said. “Just as I thought, Oki.”

After picking up a spoon from the kitchen, Kutone sat down on the veranda again. She took a spoonful. Potatoes and clams, first and foremost. Creamy milk—and cheese?—then a slight tang: wine. Chewy mushrooms, and a bit of herbal spice. A soup that the entire community made together. “Warms a soul better than a bath,” she whispered.

People warm a soul, she concluded, eyes tingling. And cautious magic words spoken by a boy who couldn’t even begin to guess their significance to Kutone’s closed heart. Not memories of old lives or cold ceramic tubs, not even thoughts of drink, or recognizing one’s insignificance or inferiority in comparison to the goodness all around.

There was no comparison.

Chapter End Notes

I’m going to reflect on the same thing as Kutone here.

It’s always so heartening to see the hit counter go up on this project. Even if it’s just one click and you decided it wasn’t your thing, thank you for at least giving me a chance. If you did like it, and if you did give me comments or kudos or bookmarks, or even if you did none of those things and you keep coming back to the story—thank you!

You are why I keep working as hard as I can on this story.
Another sunny day beamed over the Banks. With a full basket of grapes and spice berries next to her, Kutone portioned the summer fare into manageable helpings, before bundling the stalks together with twine. Spreading a bright yellow cloth onto the farmhouse’s wooden floor, she carefully set the bundled fruits on top, hoping she wouldn’t crush them in the transit between farm and community center. At least sweet peas could take a little more abuse, though the thought of crumpling the purple petals slowed Kutone’s hands, working another length of twine around the flowers. But finally, with a triumphant snort, she laid her spoils side-by-side across the yellow cloth.

After double-checking the list of summer fare, requested by the Junimos at the community center, she tucked the corners up and around her gifts, turning the squared cloth into a tied sack. With a few testing tugs, and seeing her knots holding fast, she stood up from her seat on the floor. Luckily, the bundle only slightly sagged, so with it one hand and her pack slung over the other shoulder, Kutone set off down the path toward Pelican Town.

Like before, she turned the corner at Harvey’s clinic, and passed the playground and fountain, until she stopped on the doorstep to the derelict community center. According to town talk, Morris still hadn’t found his last membership to convert the center into a warehouse. For the time being, the building, the memories inside, and the Junimos remained safe.

As always when she approached the community center, Kutone cast a cautious glance over her shoulder. So far, none of the villagers had asked about her activities inside the deteriorating building, and she didn’t want to start forging answers either.

All clear.

She scooted inside, carefully closing the door behind her. A Junimo chirp echoed from around the corner.

“Hello?” Kutone whispered into the dim building, “I’m back.” She stood perfectly still, but only the hollow whistle of wind, and that accompanying hum of chimes, responded. “I’ve got something for your crafts room.”

Again, nothing. For a moment, the building’s forgotten chimes resembled the Junimo chirps, but no apple-shaped creature poked its face from the building’s niches. Kutone cast one more glance, then crept toward the corridor.

Passing the pantry, she turned into the crafts room, where the same golden tablet lay glowing on the floor. As she approached the artifact, the pressure of curious eyes made her stop. She repeated the wizard’s words to herself: “Nothing to fear. You have nothing to fear.” The Junimos just wanted her to bring stuff. Maybe talk to her.

And maybe they expected a lot out of her. Terrifying. She stepped lightly, avoiding the creaks of the weakened floor, for the rest of the way to the tablet, then set her yellow bundle down. “Spice berry,” she read, “grapes, and sweet pea flowers. This should do it for your summer foraging.”

Two happy chirps finally answered her. Within a blink, a Junimo appeared, and hopped around Kutone’s bundle as though examining the cloth. While Kutone watched, fascinated, it raised one of
its little arms, crinkled its eyes in a smile, then chirped again.

Too struck by the Junimos’ lovable natures, she almost choked on her voice. “Um—you’re not—are you going to check inside?”

No answer. The Junimo hopped behind Kutone’s bundle, heaved, then—with perfect balance—hoisted the bundle over its apple-shaped body. It huffed with confidence as Kutone applauded, then skittered off into the hallway. With its disappearance, the curious pressure lifted, leaving Kutone in the darkness once again.

Great talk.

She shook her head. Whatever the Junimos wanted, they spoke through the golden tablets. There was no necessity for anything more than that. Like a business transaction. Kutone pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose, hoping to stem the oncoming headache. Thinking of the Junimos as friendly forest sprites had, maybe, given her the expectation of more interaction with the creatures. She chided her delusions and, snickering, sauntered back down the hallway and toward the community center’s front door.

How dare she think she was anything special. The Junimos could have picked anyone else at this rate. Maybe the wizard spouted nothing but crazy talk after all.

But just as she laid her hand on the doorknob, chirps called her back.

At the threshold to the west wing of the community center, a couple Junimos bounced high and flailed their arms, as they pointed down the corridor. Upon seeing Kutone step away from the front door, they tittered in what looked like excitement, and disappeared into the dank hall.

Clearly, they needed her to follow, and Kutone, still admittedly star-struck by the Junimos’ existences alone, dashed back into the old building and shot down the west hall.

There.

At the very end of the hall, past the pantry and even the crafts room, the Junimo pair continued their merry hops and beckoning flails. As soon as Kutone stepped into her sprint, they blinked out of view. And despite nearly slamming into the far wall of what she quickly identified as the community center’s dilapidated kitchen, she couldn’t bring herself to believe the Junimos had pranked her.

Not with those elusive chimes ringing ever so slightly louder in the kitchen.

Yet, she saw no signs of metal rods hanging in the kitchen’s window, and if Kutone’s ears weren’t misleading her, the chimes echoed from someplace higher. She looked up toward the ceiling, where along the beams of the rafters, that same Junimo pair waved down to her. Sounding delighted chirps, they pointed toward the kitchen’s sink, nestled under the window.

Glancing between the Junimos in the rafters, and the kitchen sink, she mapped a vague trail up through dusty desolation. Kitchen sink, window, wall, shelf, ceiling beam. Or maybe that protruding spit of snapped rafter. It looked easy. Looked. “You want me,” said Kutone, pointing at herself, “to climb up there?”

The fairies bobbed their arms in encouraging sweeps. One scurried further down the beam, disappearing into the ceiling above the hall, while the other continued its cheering. Distantly, like a child’s whisper, a voice wisped into Kutone’s thoughts.

The chimes! The chimes! Issu’s prayer chimes!
“Grandpa’s…prayer chimes?” Kutone echoed. Mom had never spoken about anything that sounded so like a family heirloom. Maybe on purpose? One of those Eastern “when you’re ready for its burden” type of scenarios?

Then again, Mom favored minimalism in her life. She liked loose ends tied neatly and tightly, and turned a haughty nose up on relics and treasures. As a compromise with Dad, though, she kept some photos—like marriage and graduation photos—in solid white or black picture frames, and tolerated Dad’s growing collection of shot glasses—so long as he contained them like data aligned in a matrix. “It’s cleaner and business-like,” justified Mom, “and it makes the house presentable to our guests and clients when they stop by.”

And, when Grandpa Issu passed away, Mom had no problems hauling his belongings into the dumpster. Even while Kutone sadly watched the pile of apple-themed crystalware, dishes, utensils, and clothes crashing into the can, and even while Dad, with his clenched jaw and sober, It’s okay, honey. Do what you need to do, stood rigidly at Mom’s side, she snapped back and forth between Grandpa’s belongings and the dumpster. Her movements, Kutone reflected, were efficient, but they failed to hide Mom’s lips pressed into that thin, pale line, or her wet, red eyes, or the dribble of moisture at her nose.

Prayer chimes. Whatever they were, maybe Mom would consider having those in the house. Maybe they could be the one thing from her Pa-Pa she wouldn’t call junk.

Kutone took a running start, and ignoring the dust clouds and her too-heavy footfall, scrabbled up onto the kitchen sink, then bounded onto the sill of the kitchen window. Little claps and chirps of the single Junimo continued cheering her on, as she scanned the peeling wall for her next purchase.

There. An inset beam with enough width for her fingertips, ran parallel to the edge of the kitchen window. “Fuck me, tell me I’m going crazy here,” she grumbled, and ignoring the Junimo’s mock gasp, reached up and grabbed the slim ledge. Her toes left the sill, and her arms already screamed in protest against the involuntary stretch. Now what?

She could attempt a pull-up to reach the next protrusion, that jutting beam snapped from decay. Splinters guaranteed. No dice. But that shelf in the corner—she could scrape her shoes against the side to drag herself up on top of it. Much better idea. Her arms, elbows, and shoulders just had to cooperate long enough to slide her across this thin edge. And she had to hope to all the goodness in the world, her fingers wouldn’t find a stray splinter or protruding nail.

Prayer chimes, she repeated to herself, and with the Junimo running across the beam and squeaking encouragement, Kutone hauled herself across the wooden spit. Left hand, over. Right hand, followed. Still smooth. No splinters or nails. Again. Left hand, over. Right hand, followed. Still smooth. Her body hung flat against the wall, her fingers already sliding out. If she fell, who knew what kind of junk she could stab herself on? This was the kitchen, after all. “Please don’t let me stick my foot into a working burner.”

Thoughts conjuring rusty knives waiting below, Kutone dragged herself on. Left hand. Right hand. Over and over again. When muscles and tendons and ligaments all protested, at the same exact time, the way one moved her body, a theoretically short journey turned into a life-or-death survival. Left hand. Right hand.

Then finally, her hip hit the shelf. With a heave, she threw her left hand onto the shelf top, and dug her foot against the shelf’s side. No wobble, but the coat of dust on top rejected her grasp. She had to make it quick.

I can make it. Come on. Get on top of this thing, and you’re at the ceiling.
Nodding to herself, she strained the balls of her foot, and with another heave, slammed her other foot against the shelf, and finally, finally, pulled herself up on top. Her hands slid against the dust and thrummed panic into her chest, but she found purchase with her elbows and rolled up on top.

Pressing chirps greeted her as Kutone, totally ignorant of the dust caking her hair and back, laid on top of the shelf. “You’re asking me to join you in those rafters!” she groaned. “You think that little piece of wood’s going to hold me up?”

The Junimo lifted a hand, and with a fierce expression, bounced up, and landed square on its two feet. Its little *paf* did nothing more than lift a dust bunny.

“How now get it,” sighed Kutone. “The prayer chimes are for me, for when I snap my neck after falling from the ceiling.”

She craned her neck back, watching with a smile as the Junimo bounced again and again—*paf paf paf*—on the beam. Finally, it stopped and sagged its little body, eyes forlorn.

The expression reminded her of Oki’s perpetually tearful look. Maybe she had a weak spot for cute things looking sad. “Come on,” she crooned, “I’ll believe you. Long as I can jump onto that without bouncing off it, I’ll be home free, right?”

The Junimo peered down the beam, nodded, and swept its arms up again, squeaking a cheer.

Rolling over into a crouch, Kutone glanced again at the distance between herself and the beam. Herself and the floor. Shook her head. *Don’t be afraid.* A breeze ghosted through the destroyed kitchen window, and with that air, the chimes rang again, their sonorous tone clearly above her. Prayer chimes. Grandpa’s last heirloom, after the Banks.

Oh the things she did for the sake of running from reality. Or at least, attempting to mend her reality.

Bunching her legs underneath her, she launched herself forward.

The floor yawned beneath her. Panic bubbled and boiled in the pit of her stomach.

*I’m not going to make it!*

Slam. *Uf!*

A strangled bundle of air burst out of her stomach but she ground her fingers into the beam. Coughing and wheezing, she clambered up. She wasn’t crumpled and broken and dying on the floor from a snapped neck or back. *Holy shit.*

But that Junimo—damn scurrying little thing—gave her no time to celebrate. It already had skittered to the far end of the beam, and hopped at the threshold leading back to the hall. One bounce. Two bounce. Gone.

What looked like sticks on the floor, the ceiling beams were thick enough she could carefully crawl across them. After catching her breath, wiping sweat with a dusty sleeve, and massaging her bruised diaphragm, she tested her weight. Both knees on the wood. Both palms. A slight creak echoed into the kitchen, but she didn’t feel the wood bowing. Okay.

The beams—the entire network of rafters, really—echoed in glum squeals as Kutone shimmied along the wood. Climbing through and over cobwebbed support beams, and taking care to *not fucking look down, you dumb broad,* she finally passed through the hall, and back into the community center’s main lobby and banquet hall.
More beams connected into an even bigger network of rafters, but a telltale chirp guided her attention away from the labyrinth, and to a wider awning on her immediate left. Junimos scurried along the platform, and disappeared into the dim expanse of what looked like a hidden crawlspace. Great. The life-or-death journey continues. If one thing tried and didn’t mess her up, another thing always followed and tried again.

So after crossing the rafter network and stepping onto the platform before the crawlspace, Kutone sat down again. Farm work was one thing, after all, but this climbing around and jumping onto things—her body hated doing stuff like this. And yet, she thought, how fitting was it that alleged forest fairies were guiding her, huffing, bruising, sweating, and cursing, through this maze of weakened support beams?

Behind her, in the kitchen, something cracked, snapped, and crashed to the floor. Loud and foreboding, unlike life, which did the same thing except soundlessly, and through the byways of backstabbing “best” friends.

She gazed at the open and dim crawlspace in the far wall. If this was a means for an elaborate Junimo prank, Kutone vowed to purchase that Joja membership. Let the fuckers bulldoze the place and get their warehouse running. Betrayal had become a boring, repetitive routine in her life, and she liked the idea of violently quashing affronts to loyalty. Tried and true, from her time in the concrete labyrinth, after she fell from the top.

*Prayer chimes!*

She patted dust out of her clothes and hair, and got on to her knees and hands again. She just couldn’t begrudge the Junimos. They just couldn’t be that cunning. And, well, the wizard had told her to follow them.

So follow she would.

Spatters of sunlight cast spangled shadows through the crawlspace, as Kutone shuffled along in the dark. A steady incline had her panting in the chute, stuffy with prickling summer heat, but with the chimes ringing nearby above her, she pressed on. Even though her lungs cried for fresh air free of hot dust, even though her calloused knees scratched for relief from the dry wood, the Junimos’ chirps and melodious squeaks encouraged her further. *Just gotta get to the top,* she told herself. *There’ll be air up there. Gotta be.*

The incline took a sharp turn, then another. She cursed loudly, sweat wetting her palms and dripping down her face, as the incline suddenly leveled and she made a veritable face plant into the crawlspace’s exit door.

But she opened into sweet, clean, cooler air, and a burst of sunlight shone into the pyramiding slats of roof above her. An attic, she surmised, and peeling her face off the floor, levered herself up onto her knees.

Then, a puff of wind through the crumbling wall and missing window, and the song of chimes. Leaves rustled in trees somewhere beneath her, as Kutone held her breath. There, gleaming in the sunlight filtering through the window, hung a circle of metal rods, wooden clapper gently swaying in the middle. A makeshift wooden dais, adorned with leaves, ferns, berries, and other forest fare, rose just beneath the chimes. And at the base of the dais, a golden tablet.

No Junimos visible, but she felt their eyes on her, as she crawled toward the engraved gold.

She traced her fingers across the blocky letters, sparse on this tablet in comparison to the others.
downstairs. But just like the others, especially after drinking the wizard’s vile potion, the letters on
the attic’s tablet glimmered, swam, and spiraled into letters Kutone could read. Only one word
 glittered across the tree motif engraved into the slab.

Memory

“Memory?” she echoed, and the chimes sang again as Junimos leaped to the sides of the tablet and
laid their little hands on the golden sheen. Light sparked, a wind blew, she tumbled back, the chimes
clanged like bells, and then—

Then the fading image of an older man, kneeling before the chimes and dais, ghosted into Kutone’s
view. She swallowed her held breath, as she identified the stocky shoulders and graying beard.
“Grandpa,” she mumbled, and her strength melted into stillness, as she watched Grandpa Issu
cleaning the metal rods of the chimes.

I’ve become an old man, my friends. Apparitions of past Junimos appeared at Grandpa’s side. Many
watched the old man with worried expressions, as he unwound his legs and rubbed his knees. Lewis
is taking away my ladder after this. Nothing we can do about a dying community, he says.

She remembered the Wednesday nights Lewis spent at the Saloon, always drinking two beers before
he left Gus in the early evening. “One for myself,” the mayor explained to Kutone, “and the other for
your grandfather. It was a Wednesday, wasn’t it?” The community center had probably started
falling into disrepair while Grandpa Issu was alive in the valley. His gravelly voice, usually nothing
more than a static recollection in Kutone’s ears, quavered then with melancholy.

The man’s right, I suppose. Grandpa stopped rubbing his knees, and lifted his face to view the
window, as though enjoying the same breeze and musical chimes as Kutone. You know—I have a
granddaughter now. Nagisa, sweet girl, sent us a picture. The apparition reached into the breast
pocket of his faded shirt, and pulled out a card. Look at that baby’s bright smile!

The excitement in Grandpa’s voice brought a smile to Kutone’s own features.

Along with tears.

Andres has made my daughter happy, I know it. What I couldn’t do for that poor girl out here in the
valley, he’s done for her in the city. And that, my friends, is a fine thing indeed. Grandpa laid the card
on the floor, as the Junimos gathered around the picture. They are happy. This Pa-Pa couldn’t ask
for better.

But I fear for that bright smile! Grandpa pressed his palms together, and leaned his head forward. It
is a worrying thing, to have a granddaughter with such light in her smile. I am afraid, my friends—
afraid people will steal that light from her, and she will forget the kindness of people.

Kutone shook her head. “Grandpa,” she murmured, “that’s not what happened. Part of it was my
own fault, you know.”

Grandpa Issu continued, unhearing. If little Kutone ever, ever forgets the kindness of people, I will
help. And the valley will help. He lowered his pressed palms and looked at each of the Junimos
gathered around him. You will, won’t you?

The apparitions chirped and bounced in agreement, as Grandpa laughed happily. A fine thing! Then I
leave a prayer here—may my granddaughter learn the blessings of stardew, of forest, of sea, and
may she remember the kindness of others and do unto them, the kindness she finds within her.

Her view clouded. Wavered. Sparkled. Dripped and landed on the dusty slats of the attic’s floor. She
clenched her arms around herself, and leaned forward, trying to choke off the tears as they came. “I
don’t deserve this,” she breathed. “Grandpa, I don’t—I really don’t! It was my fault too!”

A wind blew. The chimes hummed. The ghosts and the tablet vanished like smoke melting into air, into breath. Only the chimes swayed back and forth, continuing their singing tones against the clapper.

She cried. She cried and cried and cried, because she’d already started remembering kindness—in Lewis, in Robin, in Alex, in Marnie and Evelyn and Emily and Sam and Abigail and Sebastian—in all of the residents of Stardew Valley, even though she still couldn’t understand why they took her, shadowed and secretive and so goddamn sad, with open arms.

“Thank you,” she murmured into the floor. The words just came. Made no logical sense to her, but they quieted her sobs.

A Junimo touched her wet cheek. She smiled and sat up, scooping the little fairy between her palms.

“Thank you.”

Sunlight wrapped around the chimes like a halo. “I promise,” she said, “we’ll do good on Grandpa’s prayer. Can I count on you, little friend?”

It hopped from her hands to her shoulder, and nestled against the crook of her neck.

We will help!

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone leaving comments, kudos, and bookmarks. Your support is what motivates me to continue doing my best with this piece.

Follow me and my writing-related blogging at andagii-writes on tumblr.

And hey, if you think I have something good here, please, spread the word—spread the Stardew Valley love!
A crisp Tuesday morning saw Kutone racing up the backwoods road, jumping the steps two at a time, and leaping over wayward grasses and branches threatening to trip her. A few times, she stumbled over her own feet, but quickly regaining her pace, continued her dash. At a sharp turn at the mountaintop, she barely managed a greeting to resident man-of-nature Linus, before she shot down the steps and around one more corner, to Robin’s front door.

“Robin, I’m coming in!”

Yet when she burst inside, the lobby’s front desk held no one behind it. Kutone glanced down at her watch—almost 10am. “Oh come on,” she sighed, “you don’t need half the day to exercise; you only need two hours!” Their upcoming projects, namely starting a coop and a barn (“You’re not a farm without the animals!” said Robin), would have to wait.

As if answering Kutone’s dismay, however, a door creaked open nearby, and as she looked up from her watch, Sebastian peeked around the corner. “Hey,” he grumbled. “I thought I heard you outside.”

She regarded his unkempt, sleep-kinked hair and bleary eyes with a short, apologetic laugh. “I woke you up, didn’t I?”

“You did. But it works out.” Sebastian retreated, groaning, but after a few moments, showed his face again, still rubbing his eyes. “Waiting for my mother, right? Come on down.”

Maybe a little rude, but still courteous? Blunt. That’s the word. Give him a chance, Robin had, in hushed tones, once told Kutone. He’s a little slow about people. Right. And then there was Grandpa’s prayer. “Sorry to intrude.”

Sebastian was already down the steps and opening his door, propping it long enough for Kutone to enter the basement. “Don’t be,” he replied. “Want any coffee? You’ll have to take it black.”

“Black?” Probably because he couldn’t be bothered to add anything else. At least, not for the person who rudely woke him up. The sour roil of Joja-brand black momentarily bubbled in Kutone’s throat. At the same time, she didn’t want to deny his hospitality. Remember kindness, she told herself. “That—that’ll be perfect.”

“Sit anywhere you want.”

With that, Sebastian ascended the steps again, leaving Kutone to herself. “So…” she murmured, “this is your room, huh?” A basement converted to a room. At least it was cool, despite the valley’s summer heat outside. The only thing it lacked, she thought with a wince, was sufficient light. And a fan to circulate that cool, thick, musty air. A lone lamp in the corner cast only just enough light to illuminate what Kutone gathered as Sebastian’s workspace, a dense, heavy table mounted with two computers. The only other light source was the computer itself, its whirring indicating a recent boot. Various memos and notes decorated the wall closest to the lamp, a lot like Kutone’s old cubicle workspace back in the city. While she considered taking a seat in the worn black sofa next to the computer desk, her attention shifted to the bookcase behind it instead.

As she sat, legs crossed on the floor in front of Sebastian’s library, Kutone couldn’t help running her fingers over the spines. Books she read as a child, as a teenager, and books she wanted to read as an adult—Sebastian had these and more, neatly arranged in alphabetical order by the names of each
series. “Impressive,” said Kutone. “If only…”

“Help yourself.” As Kutone shot up to her feet and hesitantly accepted her coffee, Sebastian appeared to smile. “I meant the books too.”

“I almost feel bad pulling them out of place.”

“Don’t. Books are meant to be messed up a little.” Steaming mug in one hand, Sebastian crouched down, just long enough to swipe a book out of its place, and hand it to Kutone. “There’s what I promised you.”

She set her coffee down on the computer desk, happily accepting the newest installation of Solarian Chronicles with both hands. “I really appreciate this, Sebastian,” she said.

He shrugged in reply. “I don’t mind.”

Should she? “Uh.”

“Yeah?”

Kutone fidgeted, curling the top corners of the book’s pages under her thumb. Summer was about to start its beatdown on the valley outside, and inside was so much cooler. But really, after waking him up so abruptly, courtesy dictated she should leave. He had poured her a coffee though, so that meant, “You wouldn’t mind if I started this here?”

“I did say you could sit anywhere you want.” Ambling to the back corner, closest to the lamp, Sebastian sat down in his stool and pulled a keyboard to his lap. Popping his knuckles and jostling the mouse, he went on. “You’ll just have to be okay with my not talking—I’ve got work to do.”

“Consider me invisible.”

Sebastian’s sleepy expression softened to appreciation, as he turned to his computer. Kutone, on the other hand, nestled herself into a corner of the sofa. Shoes off, feet tucked under her, and twin tails behind her, she opened the book.

Between her coffee—a surprisingly smooth, chocolatey-rich dark roast—and the mesmerizing pages of the book, Kutone quickly found herself forgetting even Sebastian’s presence in the room. The quiet time, broken only by the rhythm of Sebastian’s typing and clicking, pulled her far away from life itself. She forgot Joja Co. and the nicknames and her emptiness. She forgot Breezy Banks and its burgeoning crops and remaining overgrowth. She even forgot the frustration of her missed appointment. This space, she thought in one startling moment, was so perfectly quiet, she had a chance to be her own...

Her own what? The sense of fragmented memories tugging at her chest welled up again.

As she grew more acutely aware of this phenomenon, Kutone’s thoughts wandered along clearer paths. For instance, she firmly decided to incorporate this type of complete quiet time into her daily life, and decided even further that the late evening provided the best setting for pure, uninterrupted “me” time. Reading in the semi-dark, with a hot cup of good coffee, smooth black, or even, stargazing with a glass of red wine on her veranda—these, she decided next, were what constituted a “me” time. A lulling interlude she could enjoy at the end of a long work day.

She never had this back in Zuzu City. In fact, there were no quiet spaces in the city. Lunch goers and college students on their laptops always crammed the coffee shops to bursting capacity. Tired moms, with their clattering strollers and parasitic children, always clogged the spacious city parks. Even the
libraries inevitably housed screaming toddlers running between the aisles, and the librarians’ hushing and shushing did nothing but add to the buzzing storm of sound.

Quiet. It did something to her—something good, something important—and she’d forgotten what that something was.

In another stream of thought, Sebastian, in general, made her extremely nervous, yet his terse speaking inevitably relaxed her.

She turned another page.

Halfway through another lengthy paragraph, Kutone caught herself thinking again. Sebastian made her relax? She shook her head. Black coffee woke her up first, then tended to propel her thoughts to strange territories. Yet, out of consideration, she wanted to finish her first helping, and looked inside her mug. Almost gone and, despite it having gone cold, with no acidic reflux in her throat.

“Did you need more?”

They met eyes, but Sebastian quickly glanced back to his computer screen.

That, Kutone thought, that was what made her nervous. Nervous? Conscious. She cleared her throat. “You make a great dark coffee, but I’ll have to pass. I won’t be able to sleep tonight at this rate.”

“You do have that to consider, huh?” He began typing and clicking again. “And, thanks, I guess. For the compliment. Even if you didn’t mean it.”

“Well, if you thought I needed a refill, that means I was enjoying something, right?”


Kutone checked her remaining pages for the first time since sitting down on the sofa. Just as Sebastian noted, roughly half of the book was left in Kutone’s lap. She glanced at her watch: nearly 6pm. “I didn’t mean to stay this long,” she exclaimed, jumping to her feet. “You could have kicked me out.”

“You looked like you were enjoying yourself. Seemed a shame to interrupt.” His eyes darted across the computer screen. “If you’re leaving though, give me a sec to finish this. I’ll walk you out.”

Insisting otherwise would be rude to his hospitality. Kutone stayed in her spot and gently closed the book. Then, after a moment, “What’ve you been working on, anyway?”

Caution darkened Sebastian’s features for a moment, but he then replied, sighing, “Coding. Programming. I freelance.”

“That,” said Kutone, failing to notice Sebastian stiffening in anticipation, “is pretty incredible.”

Blinking, his tension unraveled, softening to restrained surprise. “Not a lot of people say that.”

Kutone opened her mouth to explain, when a chime rang from the computer. After a few clicks and an apologetic frown, Sebastian sighed again. “Sam doesn’t know how to leave me alone,” he said. Scanning the message on his screen, he shook his head, and groaning, pressed a hand to his face. “What if I don’t want to see anyone after this?” he muttered.

“You don’t have to,” responded Kutone.

“Talk about rude.”
“You’re just looking out for yourself.”

Sebastian’s relieved expression didn’t last long, as the front door banged open upstairs.

Footsteps pattered and descended, then a couple knocks sounded at the door. “Hey!” Robin called, “I’m coming in!”

“Wait, I’ll come up—!”

Too late. Robin poked her sweat-streaked and reddened face in, and seeing Kutone, mocked a gasp. “Kutone! Were you waiting this entire time? I’m after-hours, you know. We’ll have to do that appointment tomorrow.”

“I—yeah—hi, Robin.”

“Looks like Sebby hosted you well. That’s great. Speaking of whom…” Robin opened the door wider, and stepped halfway in. Her bubbly voice instantly dropped to her Mom octave. “Listen, I know you hate me coming in here, but I ran into Abby on my way back from Caroline’s—”

Sebastian rubbed his eyes. “Did you tell her I had work today?”

“I did. She said she’d still stop by.”

Kutone swore she could have reached out and touched Sebastian’s frustration then, yet he grudgingly responded, “Yeah, fine.” Robin’s whispered apology and hurried retreat didn’t seem to register, as Sebastian shook his head and hunched over his desk. “Probably going to drag Sam with her too. Just—great.”

He sighed again, as though it were a statement. He did it a lot. Pressure in the chest, thought Kutone, that he could never relieve, no matter how much he tried to breathe it out. Never painful enough to make him cry, but so heavy and pressed against his ribcage, he couldn’t find any release for it without exploding. She laid a hand on her chest, remembering the same sensation in her own body. “I meant it,” she remarked, “when I said I thought your work was incredible.”

Sebastian hopelessly eyed her. “It’s really not that impressive.” Aggravated, he went on. “To them, I’m just surfing the web all day. That’s why they think they can waste my time.”

“You know that’s an exaggeration.”

“Is it? Think: Maru working at the clinic. Do you know anyone who’d go bother her?”

She had to choose her words carefully on this one. Agitating Sebastian any further would likely cost Kutone his trust. “I think of it,” she started, gesturing with the book still in her hand, “like this: Her supervisor is directly behind her, watching everything she does. And he notices everything—I’m willing to bet Harvey caught your smoking soon as he heard you breathe, didn’t he?”

Noting Sebastian’s thoughtful expression, Kutone went on. “You, on the other hand, a freelancer, have no supervisor to answer to—you’re your own manager. Plus, you’re working in languages most of your clients have no business meddling with.”

“That takes some serious self-discipline.” She considered the compliment, then added a dose of her silver tongue. “The type of discipline that’ll get you places beyond a small-town clinic.”

Deep in thought, Sebastian aimlessly scrolled back and forth through his work. While he seemed to scan the content, a sad, wistful distance betrayed his apathy. Then tossing his keyboard back onto his
“Even out of here?”

“If that’s your goal.”

“To the city? Beyond that? I am saving up for it.”

Kutone swallowed. Another villager with pipe dreams snaking toward the city. She tried to hide her nervous tension in an expression she hoped showed undivided attention. “I guess, freelancing doesn’t pay as much as you like?”

“Freelancing without a degree, yeah.” He tilted back on the feet of his stool, using the wall behind him as support. “I’d have been set if I’d gone to college. Easily six figures, I bet.”

She blinked at his naivete. People cheated and treated each other the same way out there, degree or no degree. Whoever Sebastian’s clientele was, they spoiled him too much with their kindness. Out there, thought Kutone, shitty people never stopped oozing out of the cracks between the concrete slabs. Those same shitty people would likely reject Sebastian’s application, based on his appearance alone, or his lack of professional experience. Keeping those thoughts to herself, however, Kutone followed the flow of his talk. “Community college is still an option. Abigail’s taking online classes, isn’t she?”

“I know.” He pressed the back of his head against the wall. “I know I should do the same.”

Sebastian breathed out a defeated sigh. “But I don’t want to. A degree is like an express ticket to the corporate rat race. I’ve read enough articles.”

And they probably captured anecdotes like her own. Sinking back down into the sofa, Kutone folded her hands in her lap, and gripped hard enough to leave imprints of her nails. Out there, the race only led to a crushing prison. The supervisors and branch heads and executives (especially executives) dangled their perfumed promises in front of her, promising her friends, money, her own house, a branch of her own, the entire world, and then—with just one offhand rumor—nothing: except a cheap rusty desk, a bargain computer, and a shiny new headset. They called her administrator, but really meant wheel cog. And once the promised friends realized the new cog was nothing more than a slowly rusting bit, they turned around and pretended she never existed. The money? That, at least, trickled just fine, enough to keep a high-rise studio afloat.

Kutone fought to tell herself other people had wildly different experiences, yet she remembered the rattle of half-empty pill bottles in the cubicle behind her, the sunken eyes of the woman next to her, the constant mumblings of the fellow two cubicles over—they were also called admins. Rusting cogs in the Joja machine.

But if Sebastian dreamed of programming jobs in the city, Kutone thought, she had no right to dissuade him. His expertise, after all, might lead him on a completely different track. So after pursing her lips, she only said, “Articles could be enough dissuasion.”

“But as if I’m not disappointing enough,” Sebastian continued, “take me out from behind this computer screen, and I just—can’t.”

“Function?”

“Something like that.”

The real world—real life—as Kutone’s old coworkers used to say, demanded mental breakdowns. Companies wanted new hires to break personal boundaries, in the name of new experiences and expanding comfort zones for the sake of the company. She spared Sebastian this comment also.
“Kutone?”

As though he summoned her back, she lifted her face, and released her hands. “Sorry,” she replied. “Lost in thought for a moment there.”

“You looked like you were about to cry.”

“Me? Cry?” She tried to laugh. Waved for good measure. Next, she told herself, change the subject. “Listen. Take your time. And if you’re serious about leaving Stardew Valley, my father might have some connections. Joja-free, of course.” She nodded to the second computer. “I just need to get back on the grid.”

“Well, not today. You really—”

“—should leave, right?” She seized her opportune moment. Sebastian’s concerned gaze, or at least, the fact he directed her such a rare expression, struck that old scar (Caramel, let me kiss that sadness off your lips) so deep in Kutone’s chest, she knew she had to leave. Immediately. Setting the book next to her coffee mug on an open space of Sebastian’s computer desk, she stood up and stretched. “I’ll see myself out then. Thanks for the coffee.”

She pivoted, hurrying her steps to leave, but Sebastian matched her pace, even stumbling over his stool as he swiped the book back off his desk, crammed it into his pocket, and dashed to meet her. The door opened again immediately after closing behind Kutone, as Sebastian followed her up the stairs, and stepped outside with her.

He came this far to see her off; she had to leave on a good note. Be sincere, she told herself. Be natural, you’ve already been dramatic enough. “Well,” she started, forcing a smile, “you really didn’t have to. You should get back to your work.”

“Look. I know I’m not the sunniest guy around,” Sebastian replied. “But it was nice having you. So…” He pulled the half-finished book from his front pocket. “Finish it. Bring it back. Tell me what you think.”

Kutone accepted the book for the second time. Uncertain for a moment, she soon resigned, and tucked it into the cradle of her arm. “I will,” she said.

“And, well…” Sebastian rubbed the back of his neck. For that one instant, as he met Kutone’s eye through his untidy bangs, a hint of boyish charm sparked across his features. “It doesn’t have to be just the book. Or getting out of here. Just letting you know.”

It was the moment, Kutone thought, Sebastian came alive to her. Terse. Blunt. A little naïve. Still, kind. Stars twinkled to life in the summer twilight. “Then I’ll be back soon,” she said. “Thank you.”
some few evenings later, she experiments with interludes.

under the deep violet sky, an undulating river of sparkling stars, she spreads a blanket on her veranda. the forecast predicts a lightning storm over the valley, but unlike the oil-slicked streets of the city, the air smells nothing like approaching rain. instead, flowering melons, blueberries, and tomatoes perfume the dewy night.

she sits on the edge of her veranda steps, and stretches her legs, tired and cramped from the day’s farming. to her right, her canine companion rests his head between his paws, and lazily flops the brush of his tail back and forth. he wonders why his master stares at the sky, when the sky is only good for dropping water and light to the earth. those lights above are too far away. he knows, because he’s called to them many nights, but they’ve yet to fall to the ground. the lights are like not-his-master humans. they act like they never hear him when he needs them most.

to her left, she pays homage to her past life in the city, with a freshly uncorked bottle of wine. no cursed corporate blue symbol adorns this bottle’s label, as she purchased it from the bartender at the saloon. while not top-shelf material, like the ports and brandies and liquors the bartender keeps high, the wine’s simple label, with its branches and leaves and flowers flourishing off the image of a gnarled trunk, takes the woman to simpler, unburdened thoughts. a drink begins with the label, after all. now, she knows she’ll sleep past her alarm the next morning, but the bottle, half of its contents already warming a dip in her core, begs for its finish, and the stars keep winking, alluring in their trance over her. sleep eludes her, as though sleep itself chases the heavens too.

ahead, past the fireflies flaring and receding between her crops, the river babbles its praise of the night reflecting on its body. like the woman on the veranda, it relishes the sensual sight of the sky, a view so unlike anything the water’s ever seen in its journey from city drains and gutters to the teeming, crystal-clear banks of the valley.

in this way, the land around her speaks in stylized, personal voices, voices that remain hushed while the sun proudly bares itself in the sky. only when the moon casts the hem of its stardew dress across the heavens, does true quiet finally set in. for the first time in the day, she can hear herself and her thoughts. her exhausted body struggles to stay awake, but it fights hard to listen to the night’s whispers.

this, the murmurs settling between the trenches of her lulling doze, is the quiet she has forgotten.

at the same time, the silence gives voice to the shadows in the hollow. the tears she bottled up in her chest mount their pressure as each nod of her head bares her secrets to the clarity of her thoughts. so expunge them, she thinks. she never cried back then, and without privacy, won’t cry now. yet, without those tears, she is a husk in which the quiet echoes, and she has forgotten how to fill in the void with anything beyond anger toward others, or frustration toward herself. no wonder. no trust. no dream.

but her body has begun to remember, in spite of the hollow. magic and fairy cheers have begun etching dreams back into the faded slate of her memories. the book a boy lent her resuscitated the play and pretend of her childhood building blanket forts and donning towel capes. valley fruits, both wild and grown, burst into sweet juices and colors she’s never tasted from the supermarket, while
crisp vegetables echo delicious crunches into the back of her throat and deep behind her ears. taste and sound and vision have revived in her senses these past few months.

that is the effect of people reaching out to her. that is the effect of the kindness within a prayer. kindness that begins as a seed within the chest of one old man, then germinates into kindness in his friends and their families, which they nurture through the years until kindness bears fruit—fruit that she grasps in the form of a remembrance, and she promises, someday, she too can be kind again.

she sips her wine, a deep red to almost black blend of grapes, cherries, and rhubarb, and reflects. the city does its best, as it did with her, to fill in the void. it prescribes hot bodies between sheets, lying kisses, satisfaction in the workplace, cold coin and sweaty bills for what it believes is the dream home. when none of these work, as they inevitably don’t, the city then recommends a selection of spirits or smokes. at that point, there’s no turning back. the haze of spirits and smokes lays down layer after layer of forgetfulness and obsession. soon, you can’t live without their quieting blanket, you can’t feel anything better than the comfort of their whispers, and the days past as you fade away. the city abandons you. life abandons you. you abandon you.

she knows people who have been abandoned. some, due to faults lying outside the scope of their control. others perceive the valley as their prison, the void between the bars leaking their dreams ever toward the city, devilish temptress from which she recently sprung free. people are the same no matter where they come from, lost people, so lost in themselves and so scattered across their own breaths that, there’s nothing they can do except wait for their pieces to come back together again, if they’re so lucky. like the hush of the sky and river, they too do not speak until night blots out the proud sun. then, and only then, do they think of the city as their panacea.

she used to be one of them, and from her patch of quiet, a sanctuary detached from the hollow, whispers this assurance—that you are not alone—to the sky. she raises her glass to them, and sips the night away.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for accompanying me through a double update, everyone! Kudos, comments, bookmarks, even a short message over at my tumblr is all food for my soul and creativity.

See you next week.
All the comments, kudos, bookmarks, and hits you guys keep sending me are keeping me in love with this story. You all are part of what motivate me, and I do hope to continue hearing from you going forward. Thank you so much!

Also, follow me and my writing shenanigans over at my tumblr. You can shoot me messages there too!

Though Oki had ample farmland to run across and abundant rivers to splash through, dog-care manuals at Gunther’s library had stressed the importance of canine socialization. Apparently, just as humans needed other humans to develop and satisfy their natural need to socialize, dogs needed other sentient beings to engage with, to learn about worlds outside of dirt, dog bowl, and Master, My Best Friend. Luckily, the big retriever was also a friendly giant, and taking him to town was less of a hassle than lugging bundles to the community center. Besides, the townspeople loved him, and Oki soaked up the attention like a parched sponge.

Halfway across the cobbled plaza, and after nuzzling Maru’s petting hand on her way to the clinic ("Mom’s right, we really should get a dog!"), Oki stopped and raised his nose to the air. Pawed at the cobble and channeled his fidgeting into a flailing tail-wag, because despite his bubbling need to bark, he knew he needed his master’s permission first.

At first, Kutone wondered at Oki’s restrained excitement, but then, she remembered. “Huh. There is that big doghouse past the saloon,” she said. “Smelling a neighbor, are you?”

Oki snuffled his reply, a sneeze more than a reserved bark. Gratefully receiving Kutone’s firm rub under his ears, he followed at her heels as she approached the fenced doghouse from the backside of the saloon.

To the retriever’s dismay, however, she stopped.

Shushing Oki’s whines, Kutone, also smelling a neighbor in the notes of hair gel and overpowering cologne, pulled Oki back into the shadow of the saloon’s corner. Alex, crouched by the foot of the fence, looked secretive, after all, talking through the fence’s posts. “You get me, Dusty,” he said. “You’ve seen the same crap I have. So what do you think?”

Kutone knelt low, whispering to Oki, “So that’s what I look like when I talk to you,” before she stood up and rounded the corner. Oki sat at her heels again when she stopped. “Alex?”

With a jump, wide-eyed Alex stumbled back against the wooden fence. “Kutone!” His shoulders relaxed as he climbed to his feet. “I—I didn’t see you there. I was just walking past this dog—!”

“Your dog,” Kutone corrected, “named Dusty?” She smiled at Alex’s groan. “It’s a dog owner thing. Your cool, arrogant jock card has been officially revoked.”

He managed a laugh, turning back to Dusty. “Guess so,” he replied. “Might even work in my favor, huh?”
“Depends on what you used it for.” She approached Alex’s side, automatically allowing Oki to sniff at the posts. Dusty, tall, sleek, lean, and glossy despite the gray hairs around his muzzle, emerged from his house, and touched his nose to the fence as well. Even the way he waved his stubby tail belied his age. “He’s built just like his owner.”

“Probably even better,” Alex snorted. “Dusty can still leave me winded after a run.”

As golden retriever and dusty Doberman pawed at the fence and whimpered high notes to each other, Alex sighed and tried to smile. “You’re looking good today, y’know.”

He used the words more to distract himself, than to compliment her. It was apparent in his next heaving sigh. At this rate, Kutone thought, the summer skies would see rain clouds. She met Alex’s forced expression with a skeptical glower. “Are you doing okay?”

His features wavered for a split second, until he turned away from Kutone’s scrutiny. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just don’t—don’t give me that look.” After Kutone maintained her doubtful stare for a while longer, Alex spread his arms in defeat. “Dammit, Kutone. How’d you figure?”

When a proud man deflated, he paraded it. Most times, he said he preferred not to, but because he needed the comfort—needed someone to inflate him just a little bit—he inevitably failed at hiding his despondence. That was the way of proud men, or in general, sunny people with lofty ambitions. Kutone knew them well, in the remembrance of a businessman stranded at a bar stand across the dance floor. Instead of voicing her personal philosophy, however, she shrugged and replied, “What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing, really. I just—I’ve been thinking.” He stumbled over his words more than usual, and summed them up into one aggravated groan. “Come on, run the dogs with me, or something.”

He unlatched the lock on Dusty’s pen, and as the gate swung open, Dusty slunk out. Pawed the ground, like he was testing the dirt, and panted into the sky as if taste-testing the air. Immediately, as if gravitated toward Oki’s scent, Dusty turned to the retriever, and closed their distance with one powerful leap. Unfazed by Oki’s shaken backpedal, Dusty circled behind his new neighbor, and in snuffling barks, urged Oki along the dirt path.

The two dogs led Alex and Kutone around the eastern side of Pierre’s store, up toward the derelict community center, then veered left toward the community park. While Oki, who quickly got over his shyness, bounded ahead and circled around the fountain, Dusty made a constant point of running back to Alex’s side, as though checking on his friend before enjoying the open air once again.

“Dusty’s kind of protective of you, isn’t he?”

Alex kept his eyes on the dirt road before them, as he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “He’s seen me go through some stuff,” he replied.

He sat down on the concrete lip of the fountain, as Dusty chased Oki across the sand of the play structure. Posture bowed forward to avoid falling back into the water, Alex kept his gaze on the dirt underneath his sneakers, as he sighed once again. “You’re not going to ask?”

“I’m not curious enough to invade your privacy.”

He mocked a whimper, and pulling one hand out, pressed his fist against his chest. “That bites me right here, Kutone. Ice cold.”

Yet he maintained an easy smile. His expression, Kutone thought with a painful, icy hot lurch, reminded her too much of that guy. Perfect businessman at the company by day, desperate lover with
her at night. She turned away, shuttering off the wind threatening to disturb the dust over her memory’s image of him.

Alex, fortunately, seemed to take Kutone’s reaction in stride. His smile mellowed into a faint semblance of melancholy. “I get this voice in my head, sometimes,” he started, tapping his temple with his finger. “Like recently. I was checking on the schedule for the Tunnelers’ open recruitment, and this voice kinda wedged its way into my head.”

“It wasn’t a very encouraging voice, was it?”

Alex shook his head, and dropped his voice to a terrifying rasp. “Fucking worthless. Ain’t gonna be shit at the end of it, useless sheet of shit hangin’ in the wind.”

As he tapped his temple again, Kutone released her held breath. Alex’s voice wasn’t just a mockery. Frighteningly, in the space of a few seconds, he had relived some past memory, and even projected it through his own voice. Nothing could convince Kutone otherwise, as she murmured back, “Someone said that to you?”

Alex stared at the crisp sky above, thinly veiled by faint wisps of clouds. The summer morning prickled against the skin, but not painfully enough to signal a blazing afternoon ahead. Dusty and Oki, kicking sand behind them as they raced back and forth across the park and over the structure, kept up their rousing bout of tag. The fountain continued its perpetual gurgle, and a slight wind rustled through the bushes around the park. Cicadas murmured across the stir of the foliage, and distantly, the rusted chains of the park’s swing set creaked against the breeze.

Without a single ounce of hesitation, Alex, coughing to regain his voice, replied, “Dads are great, aren’t they?”

“If they’re the right type.”

“Mine drank.” Sliding off his seat, Alex stood up and stretched his arms toward the sky. Then dropping his arms, he let out a satisfied breath, and pulled himself back to his full height. “Drank and said some real shitty things to me and my mother. Once that got boring, he fucked off, drank some more, came back and did the same thing.”

Kutone had nothing to say to ease the fury clouding Alex’s features then. Sympathy, she felt, was not appropriate. He didn’t need sympathy anymore. The confidence in his speech, mellowed in his solemn reflection, said Alex was already far past the stage of needing sympathy.

How strange, she thought, that even the way Alex reflected on his father so mirrored that man’s way of talking about his family. She left the coat of dust over the man’s image undisturbed, but she remembered his voice forming the shapes of his memories. He had a younger brother. The brother had more effeminate mannerisms. Their father hated that. Their father served active duty. Mother, gone. And while their father never used a belt or fist against them, his bitterness, condescension, and rejection of all ideas and expressions outside the mold of his ideals became the leather switch he preferably used as “discipline.”

Their father wanted his sons in the military. His first son, that man, said he’d become a businessman. And once I get good at that, I’ll study up on politics. Maybe run for some kind of office. Change this world for my little brother’s sake, as a “fuck you” to Dad, y’know? Just a thought.

He nurtured his ambitions as spite to his father. “I’m guessing,” Kutone started, “you decided on professional gridball as a dig at your dad?”
“Smart lady,” said Alex, grinning. “Wish I could see his face the moment he realizes it’s me on the Tunnelers, on Ferngill Republic TV.”

His smile faded. “But sometimes, I’m not sure I’ll ever make it. Open recruitments happen only once in a blue moon, so I’m stuck here waiting until I get my chance. And that’s when my old man starts talking in my head again.”

With a jerk of his head toward the play structure, Alex gave Kutone a moment to catch up, before he said, “You ever get anything like that, Kutone?”

His question summoned unhappy images in Kutone’s mind. A best friend’s text: you need to learn your place, cheating skank. A ring of creased, pasty faces around a conference table. They shook their heads at her. Optimistic for her success, they said, and they so appreciated her work, but the way she got up—so problematic, so scandalous, so unorthodox, she risked compromising her partner’s business integrity. What would the clients think? What would happen to the company image? It’s not good enough, they said, she wasn’t good enough. Later, she slammed her final projects onto that man’s—her partner’s—office desk. He was pale from defeat, sweating at his failure, but he pulled her—you said you’d protect me, you back-stabbing son of a—into his—I’m sorry, Caramel. I’m so sorry—arms and held tight. He tried to stroke her hair. I had to—forgive me—the company—you just weren’t—

“I do,” she answered. “All the time, from people I don’t want to remember.”

She’d smashed the corner of her phone into the side of his brow, to make a point, to make an example of him. To reject him cleanly and completely, and finish what he’d started at the conference table.

That man—for crying out loud, just give him his name, it’s—had still forgiven her.

“Guess everyone has something like that, huh?” Alex stopped at the raised border of the play structure, and gave a sharp whistle. Dusty, panting, responded immediately, as though Alex’s call alone gave him his second wind. Tongue still lolling out of his open jaws, Dusty sat back on his haunches, and whined in approval as Alex gave him a hearty rub. “I had this guy with me through everything,” said Alex. “When my old man fucked off for the last time, when Mom died, when I moved out here to live with Grandma and Grandpa—Dusty was with me, no matter what.”

Oki, noting Dusty’s absence from the play structure, ambled to Kutone’s feet, and sat down as well. He yawned once, then turned his sad eyes up to Kutone. She might have thought the same about Oki, if she had him back then. His company now, she liked to think, was making up for lost time.

“They’re with you, always,” she finally replied. “That’s what a best friend does.” At least, the right kind of best friend would do that.

Alex stopped mid-rub, and directed an alarmed look to Kutone. “Don’t take it the wrong way!” he exclaimed. “I’m not saying you’re anything less, alright?”

She chuckled, replying, “I’m not about to get antsy over a guy’s relationship with his dog, Alex.”

“It’s happened before.” After a relieved breath, Alex sighed again. “You want to give Haley a little dose of your coolness for me?”

“It’s my coolness,” she said. “Much as I’d like to help you, I can’t give up something that’s so undeniably mine.”

“Fine. I get it,” Alex laughed. Patting Dusty’s muscular shoulder, he sent Dusty trotting back toward
the sand, Oki behind him. “But, hey, Kutone.”

He waited until Kutone turned to him, and flashed a refreshed, summer-breeze smile. “I’ll be okay. What’s past is past. I’m stronger ‘cause of it.”

It was so like *him*, so like *that* man, that Alex’s assurance made Kutone fidget instead. Unease made her breath short, her head swim. *No, no*, she told herself. *Maybe I’ve breathed in too much of Alex’s gel and cologne. It’s not him. It’s not Rh—*

“Tell me something,” said Alex. And he started so suddenly, his voice cut through Kutone’s hazy agitation, and muted the sounds around them. The wind, the sand, the cicadas, the dogs, the water, the swings, the bushes—quiet. Determination—*conviction*—sparked in his eyes, the expression, Kutone realized with another lurch of familiarity, of a man who knew, suddenly and exactly, what he wanted. “Since coming out here, are you, well, *seeing*, anyone?”

His words wiped the coat of dust from her thoughts, which for some reason, suddenly jumped to an impromptu coffee break in a semi-lit basement, and the boy behind the computer stumbling after her as she tried to leave. Then in the next instant, Nathan crawling naked out of her bed. Rain on her window. The smell of stale beer and cigarette-breath. Other bodies, girls and boys, shaking with restrained sobs.

Then, her old partner—Rhei, *his name is Rhei*—inviting her to dinner, and then his breathless, *I can’t wait anymore.*

She shook her head, scrambling to lay the dust back over him. “I’m the worst person for that sort of thing,” she said.

“I think you’d be surprised at yourself,” said Alex. “I mean, you listen. You’re supportive. I think you’d be a great S.O.” He was all smiles, a complete turnaround from his prior melancholy. “Here, let’s take these furry dudes back and get them fed. My treat.”

“Oh. Really? That—Oki would like that. I think.”

“If he slobbers over barbequed steak as much as Dusty does, I bet he will.”

Watching Alex’s broad back ahead of her, Kutone truthfully wanted to grab Oki’s collar and run straight back to the Banks. Throw all the doors and windows closed and bury herself under her covers, summer heat be damned. She’d be happy to sweat herself to death, if it meant she could blot out Rhei’s name again.

Rhei. *Rhei.* She couldn’t cover it up anymore. As Alex and Dusty led Kutone and Oki back toward the pen, Kutone inwardly groaned. She’d thought *his* name again, and it twinged like she’d gouged a knife deep into her throat and wedged it under a calcified crevice between her chest and stomach. Damn Alex. He failed to know—and of course he failed to know, because sunny people like Alex or Rhei could never see behind them—that the brighter the light, the longer the shadows cast.

Kutone bit her lip, and cursed herself. The dust had cleared. Rhei’s name was summer-sky halcyon under the sun once again.
When she received the mailed notice from Demetrius, regarding the upcoming Dance of the Moonlight Jellies, Kutone registered two thoughts. One, *what a mouthful.* Two, as usual when these bi-monthly festivals rolled around, she hesitated on her decision. She kept up with the Banks’s restoration well enough to spare a night for festivities, but hanging out with Alex the other day had dredged up those unwanted memories, needling her from the niches of her mind’s darkest, dustiest corners. This, she thought, frustrated, after she finally remembered real quiet. Enjoyed it. Was even about to return Sebastian’s book and tell him, “The book was great, but I have to thank you even more.”

Returning the *Chronicles* had to wait, and it patiently did so on Kutone’s tea table. She tried distracting herself with summer’s last harvest, and meticulously checked each of her crops before either hauling them to the shipment box, or setting them aside for Pierre. Oki, always her faithful companion, watched with his sad eyes, and as Kutone wordlessly picked berries and freed melons from their vines, he whimpered at her attitude.

She put down her basket of blueberries, and for the first time in hours, looked at Oki. “Sorry,” she said. “I promise I’m not trying to ignore you.”

Oki padded carefully between the plants, and sat down at Kutone’s side. He accepted the gentle rub down his back.

“Been thinking too much, haven’t I?”

Since the Banks had become a steady routine, Kutone’s thoughts were no longer occupied by new things to learn. Rather,

*Caramel, you’re the best decision I ever made in this company.*

She had thoughts about soaring, then about falling.

*You made me your secretary. Don’t I get my name back now?*

*You’ve always been “Kutone.” But now you’re also my Caramel.*

She had thoughts about people becoming objects. About best friends poisoning said objects. About cracks gouging down the faces and seams of objects.

*Rhei, Jaci says people are talking about us. That I slept my way up to this position.*

She had thoughts about objects breaking, and baring its shriveled, naked core to the eyes of many.

*Rhei, the “emergency personnel review”—that’s about me, isn’t it?*

That ugly thing belonged nowhere in the world.

“Stop,” she told herself, stabbing the dirt with her trowel. “That’s why you came to the valley. You dropped from the grid. You killed yourself in their eyes.”

Oki whimpered, alarmed, and squeezed himself between Kutone’s arms and over her lap.
Disregarding her surprise, he rolled on to his back, panting for belly rub.

“Isn’t it literal, silly thing.” She acquiesced anyway, running her thick work gloves over Oki’s tummy. Eventually, she slowed to a gentle pat. “Rhei must have thought me a dumb broad when I asked him that. Maybe that’s how he realized I wasn’t good enough, eh?”

Voicing his name quickly conjured his image, but before she summoned the desperation to blot him out, Mayor Lewis’s voice salvaged her thoughts. “Mail for you, my dear!”

Thankful for the new distraction, Kutone rolled Oki off her lap, then stood up, shaking dirt off her jeans as the mayor approached her. “We really need a mailman around here,” puffed Lewis. “My old bones can walk back and forth across this town only so many times, you know?”. He handed Kutone two envelopes. “Those just came in for you. I figured I could tell you a little bit about the evening’s festivities as I dropped them off.”

She flipped the two envelopes in her hands. The creamish and squared envelope was Dad’s envelope of choice. It felt thicker than usual—he must have included something other than his letter. The other envelope was long and white, enmeshed with blue inside—a security envelope. It had no return address, but she remembered, with cold sweat sweltering against her back, a certain chief merchandise executive who insisted on sending his personal letters in security envelopes. She stuffed both into her back pocket. “Right,” she replied, “thanks, Lewis. Uh. The evening’s festivities. What about them?”

Concern knitted Lewis’s brow for a moment, but he thankfully asked a different question. “It is your first Moonlight Jelly viewing, yes?”

The mayor happily added to Demetrius’s letter, describing Pelican Town’s perfect beach location to view the migrating jellyfish up close. He explained the passage of the jellies as a signal to the end of summer, and while many saw their coming as melancholic, Lewis claimed, again and again, they were “absolutely beautiful.” Clearly, the event was a personal favorite of his. Gus would not provide food or drink for the event, to lessen distraction. Furthermore, candles and Robin’s candle boat would be the only sources of light on the beach, and the villagers would put out even those to witness the jellies’ ethereal glow.

“I can see you’re not in good spirits, Kutone,” said the mayor, “but I do hope you decide to join us this evening. The first viewing is always unforgettable.”

Lewis’s enthusiasm was contagious. Though the corner of the security envelope dug into her back, reminding her of its presence—Rhei’s presence—Kutone promised to show.

Dad’s letter was straightforward enough, thanking Kutone for a summer care package she’d sent prior. So happy to see such beautiful crops, Mom had, apparently, finally come around to her daughter’s decision. A small wad of bills made up part of the extra padding in Dad’s envelope. “Don’t send it back,” wrote Dad, “because you deserve every cent of this and more. Mom made some killer lemon-blueberry pancakes with those blueberries you sent. I didn’t save you any. Sorry.”

A letter from Mom built the other part of the padding. “I see the fruits and vegetables you send us,” Mom wrote in her blocky clean Eastern calligraphy, “and I see you so alive, like you’ve finally found something [or someone?] to live for. I’m sorry I ever doubted you, Kutone, and I promise, when you’re ready, Daddy and I will visit. We both are so looking forward to seeing how you restored Pa-Pa’s old farm.”
Having both parents’ blessings felt so good, like she’d finally done good by them. Like their lifelong investment in her was finally paying off. She knew they still worried—Mom especially—but hopefully this slackened their burden.

But Mom’s “someone” comment had snagged her. Someone to live for? As if.

She pulled out the other envelope. Turned it over in her hands again, hoping a return address would materialize so she could send it right back, or into the trash. But curiosity enjoyed beating her. Repeatedly. She slid her finger underneath the corner and ripped the envelope open.

*Please,* she hoped, *let it just be Joja 401k telling me they terminated my account…*

Instead of the white document she wanted, however, a neatly folded sheet of legal pad paper, yellow with blue college-ruled lines, greeted her. She groaned. Pulled it out. Unfolded it.

*Kutone,*

*I know you left because of what happened. I’m sorry. I know I can’t apologize enough to you.*

*It took me a while, but I went through that entire stack of applications you left me that night. And I personally turned down every single one of them, in case you decided we can work together again.*

*I know it’s too late to take my words back, but, there’s no one as good as you. If not to me, then please, at least come back to the company. I know our spark is still there.*

*Rhei.*

He was a businessman stranded at the bar. A kingfisher that shot up through the office’s turbulent floors, but never took a moment to see the people he blasted past. He saw only his goal, his dream, shining bright up above him, on a precipice he could barely reach. But real life, that dream-killer, buffeted him off course, leaving him stuck at that bar while he searched, futilely, for relief. So when he saw her, an eye of quiet and calm in the midst of the storm of humanity, across the dance floor that fateful evening, he stopped. He rested his wings. He stared at her, realizing for the first time he needed a shadow.

But there always came a point when the sun shined so brilliantly, the shadow faded into nonexistence. Instead of stopping to pull her up with him, he broke her wings and dropped her through the floors. Because that’s what the company told him to do. For the image. Clean out the scandals. Their halcyon days ended, swallowed by their flawed humanity.

She crumpled both envelope and legal paper into a dense ball, and smashed it so hard into the fireplace, embers scattered into her face. Biting her lip against the hot sears on her skin, she watched her crackling fireplace with consternation. If only the same could happen to his perfect suit and office, his face, his body, his voice, his everything, she thought, but there in her mind he stayed, smoldering like the embers in her ashen hearth.

Oki fell asleep in front of the fireplace, leaving Kutone without distraction to freshen up for the evening. After a hot at-home shower, she decided to leave her hair down, allowing the last warmth of summer to dry it into long, loose waves. Then, throwing her soiled work clothes into the hamper, she puzzled through her closet.

Like hell she’d let her old baggage get in the way of her new experiences. Moonlight Jellies, she told herself, re-orienting her attention.
Sifting past her flannels and jeans, she realized for the first time, since coming out to the valley, how little she had in expressive clothes. Emily and Haley, Kutone thought, would be aghast at her selection, screaming all work and no play. Yet at the very back, hidden behind coats her parents had preemptively sent for the winter, she spotted the few dresses she hadn’t donated at the end of her Joja term.

Kutone chided herself. She had no one to impress with a dress, and the evening air and sea breeze would freeze the beachside. Back to the usual, then. At least she still had casual sneakers to complement the nicer jeans she pulled from her closet. “And at least I make casual look good.”

She left the farmhouse, rolling up the sleeves on her warmest flannel. Tucked the hem of her turtleneck undershirt into her jeans, and adjusted her belt accordingly. Not bad, she thought, examining herself in the moonlight. Again, no one to impress but herself, and given her limited selection, she was satisfied.

Then shoving thoughts of Rhei far away, she followed the path south, toward Marnie’s ranch, then east into town. Villagers were already trickling toward the beachfront, and chattered excitedly about the upcoming event. From what Kutone overhead, there was no actual dance—thank goodness—and simply consisted of a quiet evening watching jellyfish float by.

Down at the beachfront, villagers were already crowding the docks. Most clustered in front of Willy’s fish house, where Robin lowered a large unlit candle into the cradle of a small boat. Still others continued their low conversation along the sand, waiting for Lewis’s announcement to begin the viewing. Smaller candles lit the edges of the docks, and along the tideline.

Above the rush and pull of the sea, she dimly heard someone call her name. Following the general direction to the western docks, Kutone soon found herself meeting Sam, Abigail, and Sebastian at what they considered their usual viewing spot: the end of the pier out by Lonely Rock.

“We were just talking about you!” said Sam as Kutone approached. “We need a city person’s input on this.”

Kutone raised her brow. “Don’t you count? You said you used to live out there.”

“Sure, when I was barely talking. I’m a full-on country boy now.”

Abigail snorted her laughter. “Get back to us when you’re born and raised in the valley,” she said. “Then you’ll get your country boy cred.”

So they needed input from a recent city dweller. “I’m about six months dated on city going-ons since moving out here,” Kutone said, “but I might remember something.”

Even in the encroaching night, Sam remained vibrant. “Just your opinion,” he said. “You see, the three of us have our own band, but we don’t have a genre. We can do basically anything, given our triple gold-star, grade-S ranked keyboard wizardry, kudos to this guy here.” He elbowed Sebastian in the side.

So he did music too. “Guess I have to hear you play now.”

“It’s nothing to write home about,” Sebastian sheepishly replied.

Abigail chimed in. “But I bet he’d be happy to do a solo for you, Kutone!” It earned her a hard punch in her shoulder. “Ow, you jerk!”

For the first time that day, Kutone laughed, even forgetting the shadows creeping in her thoughts.
Sam tried to get things back in order. “Come on, guys, or I swear I’m gonna push both of you into the jellies—this is gonna determine our future!”

They had four ideas for genres. Pop, for the sake of familiarity. Bluegrass, for their valley upbringing. Metal, for Sam’s expertise on the guitar. And electronic, for Sebastian’s skill on the keyboard.

“She’s gonna say electronic,” said Abigail, “just to hear you play.”

This time, Sebastian said nothing, instead nervously rubbing the back of his neck. While he tried keeping his eyes down on the pier, his sneaking, admiring glances betrayed him.

“That might be part of it,” Kutone replied, returning a knowing smirk. Sebastian averted his gaze, choosing instead to fixate on the shimmering surface of the sea. “But it takes me back to my college days, before I started full-time work at the company. The clubs were fun, and that beat helped me concentrate on studying.”

Sam and Abigail pounced with their exclamations (You went clubbing?!), begging Kutone to fill in the details. She skipped the part about meeting Rhei at her favorite club, and carefully expunged her road from business major to high-rise secretary, then back down to administrator grunt. They didn’t ask for that information, after all, and she wanted to give them the good parts only. Positivity, she hoped, would inspire their debut. Only Sebastian seemed doubtful of her story, given their prior conversation over books and coffee. So to set him at ease, she tried smiling. “Really,” she said. “It was all good fun.”

With an apologetic nod, he tuned back in to Sam’s and Abigail’s conversation about possible topics for their new genre. Deeming her participation in the conversation no longer necessary, Kutone, heaving a sigh, walked away. Picking apart and piecing together a story without Rhei in it had exhausted her, opening the cavernous hollow in her chest again.

The time for the jellies slowly approached. Kutone found an isolated pier, almost totally hidden from the rest of the villagers at the docks, and sat down at the edge. She considered dangling her legs over the water, but then promptly crossed them beneath her. They were jellyfish for a reason, after all.

“A wise decision, young adept.”

Kutone whirled around in her seat, but found no signs of the voice’s owner. She remembered the echoing in her head, along with the foul earthy taste of “forest essence.”

“I prefer to remain hidden. My observation of the Lunaloos requires some amount of discretion.”

“Lunaloos?”

“The Moonlight Jellies, as you call them. An impressive species of aquatic life, for its unusually powerful magical aura.”

“Demetrius called it phosphorescence.”

“Within the physical plane, yes. But what the scientist deems physical, we versed in the immaterial call it magic. My theory is that the Lunaloos are much like you or I, in that they are imbued with multiple essences, possibly obtained on their migration route.”

She wasn’t sure she much liked being called “young adept.” True, she used to fantasize about
becoming an apprentice, but after forcing down that gag-worthy potion, she no longer wanted to risk further detachment from reality. She already was so distant, and she needed no more reasons to stretch out that distance any further.

The wizard’s voice suddenly fell into a grave, warning tone. “Kutone. We once determined you were naturally born with the essences of Void and Sea, and I noted their expansiveness in the realm of human personality. Given certain fluctuations of your energy as of late, I must tell you: beware the Void that swallows you from within.”

Void swallowing from within… Kutone pressed her face into her hands, sighing. “Is this the part you tell me, if this ‘void’ goes out of control, it’ll affect everyone else around me? Irreparable consequences that I must remain vigilant about or something?”

“Nothing so dramatic, but I fear you may be lost to us should your Void consume you. Perhaps the collateral effects will impact the townspeople, but nothing so direct or long-lasting.”

So whatever happened to her, at least it would only be a disconcerting blip in the townspeople’s lives. The reassurance left a familiar bitterness, yet relieved sweetness, in her throat. “Right. Thanks for the warning.”

The wizard’s voice went quiet, and with it, a swell of activity emerged from the central docks. Faintly, she heard Lewis announcing the event’s opening. Something about sending off the candle boat, and the jellies would follow the current and the light, and come visit. He asked for everyone to blow out their candles, and pushed off the boat.

As the light faded around the beach, and plunged everyone into darkness save for starlight, moonlight, and the candle boat’s glow, someone, shoes scuffing against the worn wood, stopped on the pier behind her. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Since when did this exchange become so familiar? She didn’t need to look over her shoulder, or ask, to know Sebastian stood behind her. “I thought you were with Sam and Abigail.”

He nudged Kutone aside and sat down next to her. “I’m with them all the time,” he said. “Plus, you found a quiet spot here.”

“It’s nice.”

She was too tired to talk, but with the jellyfish’s glow filling the void of the black sea before them, Sebastian didn’t seem to mind. Bobbing along the surface of the water, the jellies coasted toward the beach. Blue and white lights sparkled with the moonlight, and by the undulating sea, danced like twinkling starlight.

Or city lights and neons blinking within a drunken haze along Market Street, clubs and restaurants and hotels and high-rise offices alight with sin and disappointment. Kutone heaved another sigh.

“You wanna talk about it?”

He said it so casually, she couldn’t believe this was the same Sebastian who had avoided her in the early spring. But she shook her head.

“Okay.”

She noticed then, the villagers had melted into awed silence, so much that their presences disappeared like dwindling candlelight. Only Sebastian was clear to her, and not just because the sea breeze tousled his dark hair and the drawstrings of his sweater, and not just because the jellies’ glows
illuminated the slight, content smile at the corner of his lips.

Something thrummed in the hollowness of her body. “Why did you come here? I mean—I don’t mean I don’t appreciate it—I just—I’m a little surprised.”

Sebastian leaned back, perplexed for a moment. Then, he had that content expression again, as he met Kutone’s eye. “You do this thing sometimes,” he started, “where you seem totally happy, bubbly even. Then you’re not. Like something’s constantly eating you and—I dunno—you can’t seem to forget it’s there.”

“That—that sounds about right.”

“It’s hard to leave you alone when you do that. I’m not sure why.”

The thrumming leapt up, slapping against the ceiling of her chest. “You sound like you care about me,” she said, forcing a derisive snort.

Sebastian seemed to ponder the statement, then replied, “You said my work was impressive.”

And he watched her with such an even gaze, that as Kutone stared back, she found herself babbling. “Has anyone ever raised you so high,” she started, “and given you the entire world, promised you the best of everything they had and what life had to offer, and then, with just one offhand rumor from someone you thought was your best friend, everything just—disappeared?” She remembered a scenario like this, except it was at a dance club, with tequila cocktails, and the man looking at her with careful intrigue wore a perfect suit and mussed his hair to the perfect level of casual.

She turned back to the glowing sea. “He took everything he ever promised away from you, and he made you start at the bottom for the second fucking time. Climb your way back up, says the company, but that man knows the truth.” She was, she realized, talking to herself more than Sebastian. Remembering made her choke. Made her nauseous. But Sebastian, absently curling the ends of her hair around his fingers, listened so goddamn closely.

His touch and his listening ear had strange ways of making her spill. “He knows the truth,” she repeated, her voice weak, “but he won’t tell anyone what happened, because his starling job’s on the line. You end up owning it. Yes, I’m nothing but this contrived scandal. Nothing else! Not even my own person, the person I used to be! Not good enough—!” She choked on tears. Fought them back. Refused to cry in front of him. “Sorry.”

Sebastian, pausing with Kutone’s hair still between his fingertips, turned his stare toward the sea, the same way Rhei had toward the dance floor when Kutone, back then, talked about effective communication and team dysfunctionality. Back then, Rhei, in his tequila-dazed spell, outlined a secret plan, then ended their transaction with an I wish I could kiss you. He didn’t do so until about two and a half years after, but at that time promised, if she stuck with him, he’d do her right.

But Sebastian watched the jellyfish rise and fall with the ebb and flow, and replied, in his usual saturnine tone, “Don’t be.”

Silence again filled the space between them, bridged by another absentminded play between her hair and his delicate touch. Not even the “thank you” Kutone so wanted to pay him had the courage to fall out of her mouth.

Then, as the tide slowly reclaimed the glowing jellyfish, like stars fading from the sky, Sebastian spoke again. “I think I get it,” he said. “Not completely. But, I hear you.” When cast an inquisitive look, he considered his words, but nodded and repeated, “I hear you, Kutone.”
I hear you. I’m listening. I know you’re hurt and there’s nothing I can do about it, but I hear you.

His words were so perfect.

The jellies were gone. Only moonlight and starlight, reflecting from the sea, illuminated the beach. The townspeople, save for Kutone and Sebastian, began trickling back up the trail.

He stared up at the night sky, allowing the breeze to caress him again. “Real quiet now,” he whispered. “The jellies are nice, but I think I like this more.”

She wanted to stand and leave him to his reverie, but the thrumming, that pervasive heartbeat, in her body had yet to subside. Sebastian would hear, if he hadn’t felt it already, and he would know what that pulse meant, if she stood then. And he was so relaxed and peaceful and quiet, she didn’t want him to break out of it, ever, if possible.

So she had to agree. The jellies were nice, but she liked this even more.

This: night casting a pale highlight across the fringes of Sebastian’s hair, and moonlight illuminating a glow in his eyes, colored deep, deep gray, like the sea at cloudy morning, or a smoky fog at night, and not simply dark. The chill of oncoming autumn nipped a hint of color into his pallor, and as he closed his eyes against the breeze, Kutone carefully, cautiously, caressed him with her gaze. Across the corner his brow, around the ridge of his ear, a moment’s linger at the piercing on his lobe, then down his jawline, not quite angular like a man’s, but not quite rounded like a boy’s, either. Up his chin, a feather’s moment at the content upturn at the corner of his lips, against his cheek, and then—

Then he opened his eyes and met the brush of her gaze with his own. Unwound her hair from his fingers and left behind a curl: the imprint of his touch.

*God*, Kutone thought, *you’re such a beautiful man.*

Chapter End Notes

I was so excited to upload this chapter, I nearly gave myself a stomachache thinking about it.

Burning questions? Just want to personally send me comments or critiques? Find me at my [tumblr](https://example.com). I read and keep all your feedback as part of my complete breakfast.
Autumn’s first rains came as a torrential downpour, and with it came the images and expectations of a hot shower and ready meal at the table. Anyone wandering through those curtains and sheets of rain, the townspeople surmised, could veritably be called “crazy.”

Of course, that crazy anyone only referred to Kutone, who blinked through the droplets in her eyes as she meandered through the rain. A sensible person would have brought a hat and coat into this weather, as well as a pair of rain boots, but thinking her excursion short enough she didn’t need them, Kutone had challenged herself to go without. Not that she didn’t appreciate the rain—she enjoyed the steady pelting against the top of her head—but she cursed her decision. Every step forward she took, her denim pants stuck and itched against her legs, and her shoes squashed out as much water as it desperately sponged up. By the time she reached Robin’s house—and Kutone had taken the shorter backwoods road to get up the mountain—she had become a puddle with feet, a fact Maru quickly grasped when she opened the front door.

“I bet you could start your own river,” Maru chuckled as she brought out bundle after bundle of towels.

“It’s the hair,” said Kutone, wringing one of her twin tails like a saturated rag. “Look at this—I squeeze and squeeze and the water just keeps coming.”

“Trust me, I know. There’s a reason I don’t go outside when it’s raining this bad.” Maru adjusted her glasses as she handed Kutone another towel. “You’re looking for Mom, right? She just went off to fight the rain herself. Emergency snack and coffee shopping at Pierre’s.”

“I hope it’s not for my sake.”

“She loves that you visit so often.”

Unraveling her hair from the bands holding them together, Kutone tossed her hair forward, unleashing a whip of water before tightly wrapping a towel around her head. “I swear, your mother sometimes…”

“But that’s why you love her too, right?”

She shared Maru’s grin. “You know it. Am I keeping you, by the way?”

Blinking at the question, Maru turned in place, first facing the corridor toward Demetrius’s laboratory, before gasping out loud. “The samples!” Disregarding her prior statement about “not going outside when it’s raining this bad,” she raced past an astonished Kutone, and shot out into the rain.

Minutes passed. Kutone continued dabbing at herself as Demetrius rounded the corner into the shop front. His placid, yet concerned expression mirrored Dad’s, even in the way Demetrius raised a brow as he considered waterlogged Kutone in the store’s front lobby. Then, with a glance at the open door and the cascading rain outside, and another glance at Kutone, then perfectly still with a towel still sponging her hair, he nodded outside. “Go on, then,” Demetrius said. “Help out Maru real fast, won’t you?”
Kutone blinked. “Sorry? I just came in?”

“Meaning you won’t be any less affected by the rain.” He nodded outside again. “I’ll make sure you won’t get sick, but I need Maru back safe inside. Go.”

Kutone couldn’t say no to a face and tone so much like her own Dad’s. Dropping the towels, she shot back into the rain, her mood surly at Demetrius’s effect on her.

Maru understood her father as though his dark skin were cellophane. Rain-saturated hair frizzed into a ‘fro, she glared at Demetrius through fogged glasses. “I just got her out of the rain, Dad!” Maru snapped. “And the samples were totally fine—I can handle myself in some dumb rain!”

As though charmed by Maru’s annoyance, Demetrius chuckled as he laid a towel over Maru’s head. “It’s still nice having an extra set of hands for lab work, don’t you think?”

“What if she gets sick? Pneumonia’s nothing to sneeze at, and Mom’s going to be so mad at you!”

Locks of her bangs stuck to her forehead, nose bridge, and even her cheek, Kutone blinked through the rivulets down her face. “I’m fine, Maru,” she interrupted. “I’m just sorry about the towels.”

The Kutone-and-Maru-puddles were too much for the towels Maru had first brought to the store front, and now threatened to seep through Robin’s floor. “So,” Kutone started, her rain-hazed memory kicking to clear the fog, “Sebastian’s room is through this floor, isn’t it?”

Demetrius waved aside the concern, instead ushering the pair toward the corridor. “We’ll take care of that later, if he ends up with a leaky ceiling. Maru, you take the shower first—I’ll bring you a change of clothes so you can find something for Kutone.”

“Dad! Kutone’s the guest, and she was out there longer!”

“He just wants to take care of his baby girl,” Kutone replied through chattering sigh. Then mustering a grin at Maru’s exasperated groan, she turned to Demetrius again. “My father’s the same way. Let me at least have another towel, or something hot to drink, while I wait?”

Maru scampered off for a fast shower, while Demetrius wrapped Kutone in another towel and led her to the kitchen. Again assuring Kutone he’d take care of the water later, he sat her down at the kitchen table and set a steaming mug of tea before her. “Apple spice,” he noted as he sat across from Kutone. “Let me know if you want to add some honey or cinnamon.”

Wrapping her fingers around the hot ceramic, Kutone shivered against the rain water, seeping through her pores and boring into her marrow. The scent of the tea alone rushed heat into her core, and without much care for the searing burn on her lips, she sipped on her drink. Grimaced at the spice, but nodded. “I’ll take some of that cinnamon.”

Demetrius pushed a shaker of ground cinnamon to Kutone, and leaned back in his seat. “You’re a lot like Maru,” he suddenly said.

After shaking the spice into her tea, Kutone smiled over the lip of her mug. “Like I said, you’re a lot like my father. Your flat-top’s probably a little taller than his, though.”

“It’s due for a trim,” Demetrius chuckled, patting his head. Like a switch, however, his features were grim again, as he pulled a yellowed newspaper into his hands. “I hear a lot about you from Robin, you know.”
“Sebastian said something similar. Like I’m a paragon, or something just as exemplary. I’m surprised you’re not sick of me yet, either.”

“Far from it,” said Demetrius, “because from what she tells me, you had a stable position. And your diligence is clear from the progress you’ve made on the Banks. Makes me wonder why you didn’t continue to invest it where you were.”

Kutone set her mug down, despite the shivers still trembling in her body. Demetrius’s point wasn’t a sore one, at least, not so much as other sore points, so she didn’t mind responding, “I came up short after my investment.”

“I wonder about that.” Demetrius opened the old newspaper, and flipped the pages to a lengthy article. Smoothing out the creases of the faded print, he pushed it toward Kutone. “I thought I’d seen your face somewhere—good thing Gunther keeps an archive of periodicals.”

It was like inspecting a crucial archaeological find, except the relic was from only three years ago. There she was, files, papers, and tablet in her arms, smiling just how the marketers wanted her smiling. With her eyes shining, she looked taller, feminine, capable under the headline, *The Crowning Partnership to End the Argument: Powerful Women in Powerful Business*. And there he was, next to her in his immaculate suit. The skewed angle of the photo cut off his face at the border, but the picture still captured the vibrant gestures of his hands, and the glint of the heavy watch on his left wrist. *Hi Rhei*, she thought, and imagining his sheepish response—*Hey, Kutone*—she tightened her fingers around the mug.

“You were an incredibly successful businesswoman,” said Demetrius, pulling back the article. He cast a frown down the photo. “The assistant to Joja’s chief merchandise executive. You could easily silence Morris, if he knew—yet you hide it like you’re ashamed of it.”

She sipped on her tea, starting to cool, as she organized her thoughts. First, curse Demetrius and his attention to detail. Or maybe he only remembered her grayscale face because Maru had the same mixed features. Dads cared about that sort of thing, cared too much, even, and learned to be proud of their daughters’ differences from other women around them.

Second, she clarified, she wasn’t angry with Demetrius. Wherever he took this line of questioning, he did it for Maru’s sake, if not for Robin and Sebastian as well. Skepticism about a stranger’s origins—that was a good habit, really, especially for a dad. Dads protected their families, whether by an off-hands approach like her own father, or an on-hands approach like Demetrius’s method.

But she extrapolated the line further. The moment she admitted to this past position, to this relic from what felt like ancient history, Demetrius would inevitably ask, “Why?”

So she diverted the conversation, just a little. “Is his name in there?”

Demetrius glanced down at the paper and skimmed the lines. “Rhei A. Young,” he read, and peered over the edges of the paper at Kutone’s expression. “He’s a big name out there.”

“Still one man,” Kutone shrugged.

“You were the assistant to one of the most powerful men in the company.”


Taken aback by the remark, Demetrius blinked. Crossed his arms. Creased his brow. Thought hard. Really hard, like he were about to understand the significance of Kutone’s words, but she knew, without the rest of her story, nothing about her relationship with Rhei made much sense. Realizing
this, though, Demetrius scratched the curled bristles behind his head. “So why Stardew Valley, then? Is Young looking to start expanding here? First Joja Mart, and now you?”

“He would be cunning enough to suggest that,” Kutone replied. “But no. Rhei was never interested in expanding the company.”

She noted the triumphant smirk in Demetrius’s features. “First-name basis, I see.”

Plastering the dead expression she’d mastered over the years, her voice dipped into a nostalgic iciness. “We were partners.”

Her thoughts went back to the letter in the security envelope. *I know our spark is still there.* Yes, a spark: the remnants of a perfect chemistry that boiled too quickly and exploded in their faces. She walked out on that project, leaving Rhei to pick up and lacerate himself on the glass shards that once held them together.

She could have helped their situation, but she’d enjoyed watching him crawl about in his pain.

Pulling the saturated towel tighter over her shoulders, Kutone shrugged again. “Then we weren’t,” she added. “Maru’s going into a more scientific field, right?”

“Robotics. I’d like to think space aeronautics, but that’ll be up to her to decide.”

“Neither sound nearly as cutthroat as business. She’ll be fine.”

After a moment’s regard, Demetrius folded his hands on top of the kitchen table. “Would you say you failed, Kutone?”

“Hm.” She’d never used that word to describe her situation. But considering everything: the world she had, the world she lost, the world she grinded through every day before she got to Stardew Valley, “Yeah. I’d probably say I failed.”

A sigh blew across the table. “And you said it with confidence.” Demetrius shook his head. Reserved disappointment. Dads were good at expressing that, and it carved one of the worst cases of nausea deep into Kutone’s stomach. She sipped her spiced tea again, as Demetrius knocked his knuckles against the polished wooden surface of the table. “Maru’s got a bright future ahead of her,” he said. “No matter what she does. I’m making sure of that.”

“Daddy knows best.”

“Good to hear you understand. So I’ll be keeping an eye on you. Don’t lead my daughter astray.”

Once a woman learned her power, after all, she kept it, no matter how many people spat at her feet. Even if she stared at the ground rather than the sky, authority rose to the surface of her skin like a light firing in a bulb. She could still speak, still encourage, still influence the way people think—Demetrius was wise enough to understand that.

Kutone leaned an elbow against the table, and propped her cheek against her palm—her expression of intrigued ennui. It was one of her serpentine charms she hadn’t used since dropping the city. “I stopped leading people a long time ago, Demetrius,” she said. “I’m relearning kindness right now. I warn people who try to get too close.” She knocked her knuckles on the wood, and, though Demetrius glared in alarm, smiled.

Maru, warm, dry, and hair still frizzed into a puff on top of her head, burst into the kitchen. “Your turn, Kutone! I’ve laid out some of my clothes for you, so you can change into that while I throw
yours into the dryer.” Without her glasses, she squinted between Demetrius and Kutone, and groaned. “Dad, please tell me you didn’t say anything weird to her.”

Kutone waved aside Demetrius’s reply, supplying, “Not at all—he was just telling me about the samples we picked up from the rain.” She stood from her seat and sauntered toward the corridor, Maru following. “Metal content in the soil or something like that?”

Demetrius, nodding in approval, opened the newspaper again, to the old photo and article of a Kutone past and failed. Maru, fortunately, noticed nothing, as she pushed Kutone down the hall. “We can talk about that later! First, you’ve got to get out of those waterlogged clothes and warm up!”

Quipping a “Fine, fine,” Kutone slunk into the bathroom, still steaming from Maru’s time in the shower, and peeled off her saturated clothes. She turned up the water’s heat to boiling, hoping, that she could somehow burn her skin off, and with it, the memories of her past self, faded, like old newspaper clippings.

Maru had comfy clothes, as though the cotton of each of her long-sleeve shirts went through a fluffing process each morning. “I learned good laundry from Dad,” bragged Maru, “so you can lounge about in hotel-level comfort while I work his magic on your clothes too.”

They’d made a deal, that Kutone would work the flat iron through Maru’s hair, in return for her dried clothes. As the rain continued its drumming outside, she flipped the comb in her hand to its pointed end, and parted a fringe of hair from the rest of Maru’s frizz. Then nestling the comb back into Maru’s hair, she picked up the flat iron from the kitchen table, and clamping it dangerously close to Maru’s scalp, dragged the iron down.

Demetrius watched with an amused expression. “Were you also a hair stylist before?”

“As if,” Kutone snorted back. “My hair was like Maru’s before I started relaxing it.”

“You do it yourself?” Maru gasped.

She parted the next section of Maru’s hair, as she nodded. “It’s like slathering acidic cream cheese all over my head,” Kutone explained. “Harder to do the longer my hair gets.”

“And that’s why short hairstyles are the best.”

“Long hair is sexier.”

Maru snickered, while Demetrius’s glare flickered over a different newspaper in his hands —Remember that I’m watching and listening.

Kutone shrugged, as Maru pressed her palms together and wondered aloud, “Is it your looks that got Sebastian to talk to you, then?”

To which both Kutone and Demetrius cast confused looks at the baby of the family. Undaunted, Maru explained herself. “Maybe it’s just that he actively ignores me. I mean, why else would he start being friends with you, while not even talking to me?” She waved a hand at Demetrius’s apologetic sigh. Positivity still radiated in her voice. “It’s fine. I know we’re all still working things out.”

Kutone unpinned another clump of Maru’s hair, parting it before clipping it again. “People are always working things out, Maru,” she said. She teased the comb’s teeth through the curls, and again
took the flat iron to Maru’s hair. “Have you considered, maybe, what Sebastian might be thinking about?”

While Maru hummed in contemplation, Demetrius blinked over his newspaper. Kutone remembered, after all, Robin’s insinuations about the dysfunction in the household. While she pried no further, she recalled Sebastian’s profile against the distant glow of the night sky, and found herself thinking, fleetingly, about the thoughts that went through the boy’s head. She knew he wanted out of the valley, out of the geographic prison he suggested suffocated him. As homage to that wish, he read fantastic, imaginative books, and lost himself between lines of coding across a computer screen—constructs to guide him toward some kind of a break.

He thought people—his mother, his sister (“Half-sister,” he always insisted), his step-father—had failed him, but as Kutone parted Maru’s hair again, and reflected on Grandpa’s prayer—*remember the kindness of the people*—she hoped Sebastian would someday do the same. Remember kindness, and give his family a chance.

Maru’s head tilted forward. Before Kutone could warn her to sit up, however, Maru shook her head. “Maybe that’s what I need to do.” She lifted her head and inclined it ever so slightly back. “Just talking to him isn’t enough—that’s what you mean, right?”

“That goes for anyone, I think,” Kutone replied, her voice soft. She wasn’t sure what else had to be done, but maybe it was something Sebastian implicitly understood. He talked to her and wouldn’t leave. Offered her windows into his world, in books and coffee, and never pushed the issue. Taking the sparseness of his words into account, he instead used them to assure her, *I hear you.* “Yeah. Just talking isn’t enough.”

“Both sides have to reach out, and listen.” Demetrius didn’t look away from his newspaper, but clarity cracked in his voice.

“But that’s the problem, isn’t it?” said Maru. “Sebastian can listen, but he won’t ‘reach out’ because he wants to.”

Not so, thought Kutone, from what she remembered of him at the Moonlight Jellies, and even before that, during the night of the luau. But that was her perception—a perception so inarguably *hers*—of Sebastian.

So she kept her mouth shut, and left Demetrius and Maru in their thoughts. Maru neither moved or spoke. Thoughtful. And Demetrius wasn’t really reading the newspaper in his hands anymore. Thoughtful. The rain continued its chiming patter against the windowpanes.

Kutone finished styling Maru’s hair. Comb in hand, she cleaned up Maru’s side part, and after a few strokes of the comb, let out an approving snort. “There you go,” said Kutone. “Eye for an eye. Did I hold my end of the deal?”

Maru brushed her fingers through her straightened locks, and with Demetrius’s smile, whirled in her seat. “Held it and so much more!” she exclaimed, stars in her eyes. “Do my hair and give me advice? Dad, can we adopt Kutone as my sister?”

“I don’t believe she’s an orphan, or young enough for that.”

“It was worth a shot,” Maru laughed. “I guess I’ll have to convince Sebastian to marry you or something.”

Kutone blinked. “Talk about jumping the gun, Maru. We may talk a little, but I’m not sure we’re
even friends at this point.”

At this, Maru shooed Demetrius’s attention away and whispered into Kutone’s ear, “Gotta be. I saw you two together at the Moonlight Jellies.”

“Does it mean much?”

Maru shrugged. “True, it’s super hard to tell with him. But you’re not even fazed about someone seeing you? You’ve got the coolness down pat.”

The door slammed up front, followed by Robin’s frustrated cursing. Kutone blew an uncertain breath through her nose, as she followed Maru and Demetrius down the corridor.

Robin hadn’t been the only one to come back transformed into a puddle, however. Next to the sputtering mom stood Sebastian, hair plastered to his face, and water flooding every thread and seam across his body.

As Maru and Demetrius fetched dry towels, and Robin shot off for the shower, Sebastian pulled his hands out of the pocket of his sweatshirt. If he looked the picture of misery before, it quickly dissipated into intrigue. “You’re in Maru’s clothes,” he mused.

“We half-drowned out there ourselves,” Kutone replied. “She’s got my stuff in the dryer for me.”

“She’s nice like that.”

He watched the rippling puddles on the floor, reflecting the ceiling lights. Sadness, Kutone realized, crept into the crease in his brow, the longer he remained quiet.

She wouldn’t ask why, but she could probably turn around his melancholy, though she only knew a couple ways how. She opted for a common tactic. Hands on her hips, she gave him a smile. “Hey.”

As he looked up, she flipped her loose hair over one shoulder, and pivoted slowly on the balls of her feet, like a model showcasing a new clothes line. “I make these threads look good, don’t you think?”

Oh did he stare. Maru’s long sleeves came up just shy of Kutone’s wrists, and the waistband of her sweatpants came up only a few centimeters past her hips. Something happened somewhere in the line of his thinking, because through the entirety of his long, thin breath, Sebastian’s color went from pastel pink to rosy red.

It was the effect she wanted. She crossed her arms and laced her voice with a sultry whisper. “That’s awful nice of you, Sebastian.”

He pressed a hand to his reddened face, and shook his head, as though trying to reset his thoughts. “I didn’t even say anything—”

“I mean, I could have said ‘I’ll listen,’” replied Kutone, “but that goes without saying.”

“It does?” Incredulous and distant at first, Sebastian’s disbelief softened as Kutone nodded. Though she offered no other explanation, he dropped his hand, shaking rainwater off. Smiled through his blush and the raindrops against his skin. “I guess it does,” he said. “You wouldn’t lie to me.”

She had her reservations about his conviction, but she bit her tongue, seeing Sebastian’s expression. And though the color in his features had lightened already, something glimmered in the boy’s gray eyes the longer he maintained eye contact with Kutone. Like, Kutone thought, something had resuscitated deep in his thoughts, and he couldn’t bring himself to kill it again.
It was the same expression with which he’d parted ways with her, on the night the jellyfish had passed. They’d walked almost too close together, yet with no conversation, down the length of the beach. Gazes down on the sand, they’d let the rush and recede of the waves speak for them, until they crossed the bridge back into town and entered the plaza. She had to go west.

He could have chosen to go east, but, *The backwoods road is shorter.*

*Isn’t it the same either way?*

*Maybe.* He started toward the bus stop, and the farm beyond. *It could be longer too, if I walk with you.*

They’d lingered a while at her doorstep, long enough she momentarily considered letting him stay the night—stay with her—until he smiled and rubbed the back of his neck. *I’ll see you soon,* was all he said then, with his slight smile that nearly made Kutone choke.

They were flirting, she realized, on Sebastian’s terms. Quiet, reserved—he was a listener, after all—and almost too trusting.

She regretted her prior tactics to perk up his mood.

At least, until a dry towel slapped him in the face, dimming that resurrected glint, and Demetrius’s hand landed on Kutone’s shoulder. “Dry off, Sebastian,” said Demetrius. “And for you, miss Kutone.” He pressed her folded bundle of dried clothes into her hands. “*Out.*”

Dads protected their houses, after all, especially from people like Kutone. Kutone, a dormant, but powerful woman hiding another side, another face, under her secretive coils.

She rather *missed* exuding that dominant allure, but with a knowing smile, promised to Demetrius, as well as herself, she’d never use it on Sebastian.

Chapter End Notes

Hey all—as always, thanks so much for your continued support! Every comment, kudo, and hit you send me becomes further nutrients in my lunch, and helps me draw out the best of this story.

Burning questions for me or Kutone, or maybe you just want to talk to me? My message box is open over at my *tumblr.*
Those first rains passed within a few days, and as Kutone planted autumn’s first round of seeds, she thought herself perfectly able to function again. She appreciated Sebastian’s listening ear, and recognized——remembered——the type of woman she used to be. She saw the effect she had on the boy, and decided at the same time, to never again give her vulnerable display from the Moonlight Jellies. And, she was finally, finally, purging her encroaching thoughts about Rhei. Granted, she wasn’t always successful——Rhei was also a powerful, alluring force—but she threw herself into what Pierre called the busiest season of the year, and fought hard against her memories.

She keenly remembered Pierre’s advice when she stopped by on one of those early rainy days, that winter effectively murdered all crops, except for roots and tubers hiding beneath the snow. While modes like fishing and mining generated a modest income, autumn was the last time Kutone could hope to make any sizable profits from her crops.

So that kept her busy. By the end of the first week, she had tilled and planted the first field of the Banks with rows of pumpkins, yams, cranberries, and amaranth, as well as a few smaller, personal patches for bok choy. With the Banks going so well in the first few months of its restoration, Kutone expected even better. She couldn’t wait to expand her repertoire, either, especially after she found blueprints for wine kegs and barrels in Grandpa Issu’s old bookcase. What kinds of fruit blends could she come up with? Would she use traditional oak, or wood chips? Could Pierre order in some seeds for spices?

A clearer vision for the Banks developed in her mind the more she considered the blueprints. Could I make this place into a winery? Maybe add a tasting room for cheese sampling too? She definitely needed a cellar at some point, then——Robin could help out with that. And she’d have to consider grazing space for her animals, as well as some way to get the greenhouse, dilapidated remains kindly identified by Robin, rebuilt and working again.

Her thoughts jumped back to her old work. Having journeyed to many local vineyards around Zuzu City, visions of the Banks’s future took many of its ideas from those wineries. She remembered the rows and rows of grapevines trailing over fields and foothills, seemingly into the horizon, and their vintners overseeing laborers as they picked only the best fruits. She remembered knocking her knuckles against tinny industrial barrels, then avoiding splinters from traditional oak kegs in cool cellars. And most of all, she remembered the fondness vintners regarded their sealed and labeled bottles. Each blend had its own name, associated with a story belonging solely to the creator.

Kutone rolled up the blueprints and carefully propped them against the foot of her bed. Sometimes, she thought, there were no fond stories associated with dreams. The only reason she visited so many vineyards after all, was because she’d been an assistant to the man who wanted to sell the best local fare under a ubiquitous name. It didn’t even need to be Joja. Rhei simply wanted a familiar name to spread word and profits on local goods. Wine happened to be his favorite.

And they’d shared a lot of it in their three and a half years together as executive and assistant. Five years total, if she included their platonic beginnings at their favorite dance club.

She shook her head: no way she could make the Banks into a winery. Not with the weight that suffocated her thoughts every time she thought about the possibility.
In the same instance morosity overtook Kutone, so did fury. She had to stop thinking about him, but she saw him—felt him—in every single thought she had about restoring the Banks. So, taking sword and pickaxe in hand, she prepared to set off up the mountain’s back road.

The red flag on her mailbox was up again. Like a lightning rod, it attracted dread. She didn’t want to know what was inside, and hoped she’d find nothing but mail from one of the townspeople, but another part of her knew exactly what she’d see. After all, Rhei did say, on their final day of working together, he didn’t want to give up on her.

*Oh, did you conveniently forget to tell yourself that some ten hours ago, when you walked out that conference room with your tail between your legs?*

Her own voice sounded so foreign in her head. So angry, so spiteful, so hurt.

She opened her mailbox. Sure enough, it contained one security envelope, with only her address on one side, and no return address. Without further thought, she sliced through the seal and pulled out the lined paper inside.

*Kutone,*

*I’m writing so I don’t surprise you.*

*You probably know by now—Joja has a branch in Stardew Valley. I’m in charge of its upcoming performance review.*

*Autumn also features Pelican Town’s annual Stardew Valley Fair. I’ve personally been interested in the local wares showcased there, so I’m using the review as my chance to take a look around.*

*I know you need your space. But I’d be so happy, so honored, if you agreed to walk with me around the Fair, and gave me your input on the locality. Please at least consider it.*

*Rhei.*

He wrote in a way that tried to mask his desperation. Maybe it was out of consideration of their situation. Yet the letter seeded a deep exhaustion in Kutone’s body, forcing her to sit down on the veranda, instead of heading toward the backwoods road. It prepared her, at least, for the postscript at the bottom of the paper.

*The Fair was one of those things I wanted to do with you, before everything fell apart. I’m sorry.*

“Too little, too fucking late, you son of a—!” She crumpled Rhei’s letter and envelope again, but instead of running inside to the fireplace, she nearly pulled her shoulder in throwing the wad as far into the fields as she could. His regretful, whimpering tone in both letters so far, begging Kutone to forgive him and give him another chance—like hell she’d give in. She remembered what she’d told Sebastian—how she’d been lifted so high, and given the entire world—and her old, scarring anger flared again. It was the same anger that had exploded in her superiors’ faces when they told her she’d “compromised Mr. Young’s business integrity,” and the same fury that had incinerated her remaining connections in the city.

Now it had nothing else to burn, except for ore veins and void spirits lurking in the mines.

Yet she tried making sense of her feelings, as she bashed the pommel of her sword into another shaman’s mask. The spinning debris around it scattered back to the ground, as it reeled and howled
in pain.

“Close,” said Kutone, “that’s really close to how I felt.”

Before she could finish it off, a hulking brute of a shadow smashed its fist into her side, sending her sliding and crashing into the wall. She barely peeled herself off and brandished the flat of her blade in time to take another stinging hit, parrying and slicing down. Her sword fell out of her trembling hands, but she couldn’t stay unarmored for long—another brute loomed through the darkness, fists clenched together like an upraised hammer. A ringing clang echoed through the caverns, as fist met blade over her head, this time bringing Kutone down to one knee.

Tears stung the corners of her eyes, as her hands, wrists, and arms trembled in screaming protest against the dangerous humming metal of her blade. A wind stirred again—the shaman had briefly recovered from its broken mask and dented face, and waved one hand in preparation for another spell. She had to get to it—quickly.

Sidestepping the brute before her, she pivoted once and leaped forward, sword held ready for a stab. But too late—the shaman flicked its wrist, and Kutone couldn’t step out of the way. Sparks fizzled and jolted through her body, and her bruises and aches throbbed and stung even harder.

This, she thought, the excruciating pain bringing her to both knees, this was exactly how it felt back at that conference table. When they noted her undeniable skill, they also talked about her “exotic qualities,” how they might have “swayed the integrity” of Mr. Young’s career—and then they turned to him. What would your clients think of you pursuing such private relations with your own subordinate? Are you sure she isn’t influencing your decisions on these transactions? As the affected party, Mr. Young, you must understand we are merely concerned for your promise, your credibility, your future…

Rhei had folded so quickly, his bluster about protecting her fading like smoke in wind. She instantly became the Cheating Skank of the company, the woman who slept her way up to her promotion. He never tried to prove or say otherwise, but he did call her, text her, message her, over and over again,

>>I’m sorry
>>I’m so, so sorry
>>I’ll make this good again I promise
>>Just
>>Please
>>Please give me another chance

The shadow brute over her swung its fist into her already weakened side, barely protected in time by the flat of her blade. She flew again, and spun into a nearby collection of deteriorating barrels and crates. In the settling cloud of dust and splinters, she struggled to upright herself.

They never terminated her, saying they wanted her to learn humility, and work hard to make up for her transgressions. She needed to prove herself, without Mr. Young to support her. They kept her only for her “undeniable skill,” but they needed to see “results” from her. And with consistent results, they’d consider bringing her back up.

It was all her, they said. Her wrongs. Her imprudence. Her misplaced cunning.

When in fact, as she told her superiors once Rhei completely deflated, Pardon my extreme rudeness, Sirs, but Mr. Young did this to himself. After approaching me out of his own volition, he offered me a position with this company, then conceived the idea of having me work my ass off to gain eligibility for this promotion—and then, wouldn’t you know it—nominated me himself! I took my work
seriously! For two and a half years, I maintained his schedule, I took the minutes from his meetings, I reviewed and edited his paperwork, and I helped him negotiate and close these transactions he couldn’t pull off on his own. And my reward? A confession: said he loved me and threw me onto the bed of a ritzy hotel, and fucked me until he literally couldn’t anymore.

“And even after he threw me under the bus, I still loved that man to death,” she murmured, finally staggering to her feet. She held her sword loosely, with its point dragging on the floor. So lost in her thoughts, she barely made out the void spirits stalking in a pincer movement around her. “He was so fine, so perfect, so brilliant, and I loved him so hard.”

So the desperation Rhei wrote into his letters—she understood it. She thought, multiple times, of forgiving him, and allowing him back into her life, but the fall from grace, the ostracization, the name—cheating skank!—the drink, the empty sex, the crushing grind of it all on her soul made that anger spark again. She so wanted to blame Rhei. That was why she left a scar on his face, hoping he’d remember and regret that he’d ever abandoned her. That was why she started bringing boys and girls to her apartment, and why she made sure Rhei still had her key when she had a different boy in her.

And that, to Kutone’s twisted delight, had killed Rhei. She could never go back.

The brutes lunged at her flanks. She dipped, leaped, rolled forward, and once on her feet, raced for her life to the mines’ elevator.

Then, quiet, as the elevator doors shut and creaked back up to the surface. She sank to the floor, sobbing.

The dying autumn light tinged the skies a slow-burning red, when Kutone, puffy-eyed, bruised, scraped, disheveled, dusty, and slumped in exhaustion, emerged from the mines. She had an encouraging haul of ores and crystals, as well as a new, heavy clarity in her chest. Figuring she’d sort out the last of her thoughts at the bathhouse, she turned her steps west, preparing to head north when she heard the distant echo of metal on metal tinkering, from Robin’s house.

Store hours had long passed for Robin, meaning the sounds likely came from her personal projects. And maybe she’d be open to an evening confessional. Robin, she rehearsed, a part of me still loves my ex. No. A part of me still loves this one guy I killed emotionally, and I don’t know what to do. That would probably surprise Robin into listening. Without regard for her appearance, Kutone turned around and headed toward the sound.

Upon descending the steps and rounding the corner, she noticed the garage shutter opened wide, and in it, by the gleam of an outside lamp, one tantalizingly shiny motorcycle. Kutone had only seen them in passing on the streets of the city, and honestly hated them for their criminally loud engines and pungent exhaust, but seeing one so close she could see her reflection in the chrome? She leaned her sword against the wall of the house and, breath held in wonder, trudged toward the garage.

As she approached, however, her steps alerted the lone figure sitting on the ground. Kutone stopped, her mind instantly short-circuiting and blanking out in haywire as Sebastian turned around. “H-Hey,” she said, suddenly and acutely aware of her rough appearance.

Not that Sebastian, in faded black pants and t-shirt, and stained with oil and grease up his arms and even across his face, looked any better. If anything, Kutone’s sudden appearance had him equally flustered. “Hey,” he replied, absentely scrubbing an oil smear on his cheek. “Uh…I wasn’t—I didn’t think I’d see you today, so I’m not—sorry.”
“It’s fine—you’re fine. I mean…”

Their silence this time carried the awkward weight of expected conversation. Kutone’s eyes fell on the motorcycle again, thankfully diverting Sebastian’s potential attention away from her swollen eyes and skinned cheek and bruised sword arm, and back to the bike. He rubbed his nose with the back of his wrist, as he hesitantly, searchingly murmured, “What do you think?”

“Obviously your pride and joy,” said Kutone. She tried to relax the tension in her shoulders, and winced instead at the aches rolling through her body. “Is this what freelance got you?”

Sebastian, at first, remained in stony silence. Then, picking up a rag draped over his knee, he carefully wiped the grime off what looked a bolt. “Dad, actually,” he murmured. “Before he went away.”

Not the full story, Kutone thought, but he seemed reluctant to continue with the subject. After a last look at the bolt he held, he worked it back into place with a wrench. “I go out for rides sometimes,” he started again, nodding to the sky, “when it gets like this.”

She watched his hands, as he picked up what looked like a canister, and gently cleaned and oiled the piece. As long as she remained still, Sebastian seemed more willing to go on, and after the hellstorm of her thoughts, Rhei’s letter, and her abuse in the mines, Sebastian’s voice settled in her ears like a cool salve.

A small smile lit his features. “It’s great, y’know. Empty road ahead, nothing but the wind against me. City on the horizon, all faint, kinda like a dream.”

He paused in his work, as conviction emboldened his voice. “Someday, I’ll get there. To the city. And I’ll go even further. I want to see how far I can go on my own.”

Kutone, in her mind, compared him to distant starlight, faint at twilight, but vibrant and glittering in deep night. Though she felt a small knot in her throat at the thought of possibly seeing him leave, she couldn’t bring herself to stop him either. “When you get out there,” she softly replied, “tell me about it. I’d love to know what you see.”

He stopped in the middle of pouring in clean, golden oil, and looked up at Kutone. Whatever went through Sebastian’s thoughts then, he seemed confused, and yet, perfectly content with his next words. “If you want,” he said, “I’ll take you out sometime.”

She crouched to his level, as that mischievous spark darted in her chest. “Is it a date, then?”

At this, Sebastian quickly averted his eyes and huffed. “Don’t press your luck,” he muttered back, roughly finishing up his work.

There was another silent moment, this time free of that awkward weight. Kutone stood up as Sebastian cleaned off oil prints from his hands, and, after picking up his tools and the old oil he’d changed out, dragged down the garage’s shutter. “Hey,” he said, fumbling with the lock, “you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but…you’re not okay, are you?”

He turned to her after locking the garage’s shutter, with such a concerned expression that Kutone’s habitual “I’m fine” halted in her throat. This guy, with his terse speaking and perpetual melancholy, really knew how to unravel her habits, whether he realized it or not. She squeezed a hand against her bruised side, and finally shook her head. “It’s been a really long day,” she said, her voice trembling. “You said you’d listen. Can I hold you to that?”
Nighttime had fully settled over the valley when Kutone and Sebastian, back in his favorite sweatshirt and enjoying his evening smoke, sat together at the banks of the mountain lake. In her hands, Kutone cradled a warm mug of coffee, milk and honey added to “take the edge off the caffeine. Since you still need to wake up tomorrow.”

For a while, as autumnal leaves drifted over the surface of the starlit lake, she couldn’t bring herself to start talking. Where would she even start? A part of her didn’t want Sebastian to know about her odd and humiliating position back at Joja. Even more than that, she didn’t want to tell him about Rhei, about what they’d done to each other, yet her dangerous escape into the mines that day had to be prefaced with that information. Sebastian had, after all, noticed Kutone’s winces and grimaces, and offered to help her to Harvey’s. She had declined, of course, saying rest and relaxation would heal her better than a trip to the doctor’s. Despite their back-and-forth regarding her well-being, Sebastian compromised with at least cleaning and dressing the scrapes on Kutone’s cheek, and didn’t press the issue further. Instead, he waited, patiently, for Kutone to speak.

She decided to ease herself into it. “As someone wanting to get out the valley,” she started, staring at her coffee, “you must have thought me crazy for moving into it.”

Sebastian considered for a moment, then slowly nodded.

“Don’t worry. I’m not offended,” Kutone continued. “I just—I needed to get away. And I thought I did.” She watched the smoke leaving Sebastian’s lips, wishing her own thoughts would come out as fluidly. “I know you dream of a life out there, Sebastian, but I was dying. I had nothing good to look forward to, nothing to surprise me or make me laugh, or really, feel anything.”

“Does this have to do with what you told me at the jellies?”

*Has anyone elevated you so high, and given you the world…?*

Kutone nodded, thankful for the proper segue. She breathed in, sharply enough for pain to stitch her side, then back out. “Rhei Adrian Young,” she finally blurted. A dry laugh laced her words. “Joya’s rising star, negotiation ace, my boss, and my loving boyfriend.” She felt Sebastian’s incredulous gaze on her, and shook her head. “It didn’t last. The tops didn’t like it. No romance in the workplace, especially between superior and subordinate—personal biases would discredit the superior’s integrity, or something like that.

“That part, I don’t mind. We did mess that up. But, y’know… Rhei brought me into the company. Rhei confessed his feelings first. And Rhei promised he’d protect me, that he’d do good by me. Of course, he conveniently didn’t explain that when they brought me in and asked if I’d slept my way up to a promotion.”

“Slept your way?” echoed Sebastian.

Kutone nodded with a wry smile. “My best friend at the time spread some nasty rumors. ‘You needed to learn your place, you cheating skank.’ Some best friend, right?”

“…You became a scapegoat, so he could keep his job.”

“And then decided it’d be a good idea to write me a letter, almost two years later, asking if I’d accompany him during the fair that’s coming up.” She paused for a sip, the warm ceramic dulling the sting of alcohol and bandages on her cheek.

“I never realized I was so sad and angry about the whole thing,” she went on. “I guess, I got good at hiding it from everyone and myself. You end up practicing that, when everyone side-eyes you and
calls you the company’s cheating skank. So I still don’t have it in me to forgive him.”

“I wouldn’t either.” Sebastian took another drag. Breathing out another plume of smoke, he considered the remaining length, and flicked off the ash. “If you did though,” he started uncertainly, “would you take him back?”

“No.”

They turned to each other, equally surprised by her sharp and instant answer. “What if he told the truth and quit the company?”

“Still no.” So why had she muddled over this before? Maybe that was the power of talking it out after a severe beatdown in the mines. Or maybe, Kutone thought, having Sebastian ask so directly brought her straight to the point. “There’s too much hurt I’d have to face. I can’t do that to myself anymore.”

He momentarily considered her words. “You—you didn’t call him your ex,” he finally said. “You still love him, don’t you? You hurt because you still love him.” He seemed to hold his own voice at a distance, restraining the emotion that threatened to break him. Avoiding Kutone’s questioning glance with a shallow shrug, he added, “Sam writes some corny lyrics sometimes. At least that one’s starting to make sense.”

She wanted no misunderstandings with him. She knew, of course, talking to Sebastian about this had been a huge mistake, but he listened so well. “If I do still have feelings,” Kutone slowly replied, waiting for Sebastian’s attention, “They’re nothing good, and I’m in the middle of letting go of them. That’s why I’m angry. That’s why I went and beat up void spirits, half-hoping they’d kill me along the way.”

“Hey…”

“But talking to you, I think—I think I get it now. I want to let go of him, Sebastian. I want something new. Like, you bringing me here with this coffee you made for me, while you sit there smoking and listening to me?” It took her a moment to realize she was smiling, but she kept it, even as Sebastian, cigarette loose between his lips, regarded her with a dazzled expression. “I love it, you know. Granted, everyone here in the valley goes out of their way for me, in their own ways, but I haven’t had that in so long.

“You, especially. You—!” She turned in the same instant Sebastian drew his gaze from her lips to her eyes. And he held it. “You make me realize…” She faltered, suddenly aware of the heated flush creeping up her neck and ears. Damn. That’s a blush. She hadn’t had one of those in years. She stopped herself from saying anything more, and took a long, slow sip of her coffee.

But, maybe due to his quiet nature, Sebastian possessed a sharp intuition that complemented his minute observation. “I make you realize…what?” His voice was low, sultry, the kind of voice that could convince her to his bed, were that his intention. She shook her head, earning a chuckle. “Come on, I’ve already listened this much. You can keep going.”

As if she’d really give a voice and words to the fluttering that made her heart do flips in her chest. At least, not yet. But maybe, she thought, she’d be okay with dropping clues. “I like this more,” she finally, meekly, answered. “A whole lot more than feeling sad and angry all the time.”

He seemed satisfied with the answer, and resisted needling her any further. “You should make a habit out of that,” he replied, then indicated her eyes. “You look a hell of a lot better, at least.”
“Shut up, you jerk.”

“I mean it.” He snuffed out the rest of his cigarette, and stood up, extending a hand to help Kutone. His grip was firm, and his pull, steady, and for a long moment, he didn’t let go of Kutone’s hand. When he finally, gingerly, let go, he pushed both of his hands into the front pocket of his sweatshirt. “Feeling better?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” He pulled one hand out, lifting it as though to pat Kutone’s head, but with a start, brought it back over his head to seemingly rub a knot in his shoulder. His voice cracked, just a little. “I’ll walk you as far as the backwoods.”

Silence again set in on their walk, their pace slow as though neither wanted to leave. The warmth had long since faded from the ceramic mug, but Kutone clasped it between both palms anyway. Its solidity comforted her. Grounded her. So when Sebastian gestured for the mug back, and left it next to his doorstep, she hesitated. Missed the anchor between her hands, missed the kind warmth—missed having proof of Sebastian’s care so close to her chest. Strange, she thought. Leaving behind that mug felt a lot like leaving behind Sebastian, though Kutone couldn’t understand the process of her own thoughts.

Still, she picked up her sword, and rounding the corner of the house and passing Maru’s telescope, they climbed the steps. Sebastian kept a slower pace, about a step or two behind her. He was still with her. His presence alone dissolved the general pain, the heartache and the bruising, in her body.

She wanted to stay longer.

They arrived at the mountain back road too quickly. Even Sebastian lingered. “You’re sure you don’t need me to walk you the rest of the way?”

She produced a glowing ring from her pocket, flipped her sword upright, and smiled. “I’ll be fine.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. And, Sebastian?” Kutone neatly pivoted around as she started on the path back to the Banks. “Thank you. For everything.”

The light of the ring faintly caught what looked like dazedness in Sebastian’s features. He blinked a few times, stupefied by something, then responded, in a return to his usual dry manner, “Well, you let me in.” He considered, then added, “You trusted me. Thanks.”

Trust. So that was enough to earn her Sebastian’s rare smile. That...

“Be careful on your way back.”

...That’s nice.

“I will.” Kutone turned back around and set off down the path.

"See you, soon."

She pressed a hand against her still-fluttering heart.

Chapter End Notes
Hey, so, is this considered a slow-burn fic now? Is that what I'm writing? Sometimes, I don't even know.

Ohhh, you guys, all those comments and kudos and hits you've been sending me have been such good substitutes for actual food and nutrients, my stomach may be grumbling but I feel so satiated! Keep sending them because I may finally be able to buff up.

Find me and my writing shenanigans over at my tumblr.
Psst... Thanks again, as always--and I'll keep thanking you all--for the kudos, comments, bookmarks, and even those hits on this fic. My Thanksgiving was even more nutritiously delicious thanks to you all.

Find me at my tumblr if you wanna chat!

Old George stroked a finger across his frowning, wrinkled features, as he peered down at a upended basket of produce on his kitchen table. From pumpkin to eggplant to corn to amaranth, to even the yams, he slowly cast his critical eye down their bodies, their colors, and even their texture against his fingers. Meanwhile, across the dining table, Evelyn happily sliced the pointed ends off the same yams, and placed them into a pot filled with boiling water. And nearby, with Alex leaning on her shoulder, Kutone wove her fingers together, stilling their nervous twiddling. She’d never asked for the impromptu appraisal, but with the Stardew Valley Fair fast approaching, George had offered his past farming experience as a precursor to the grange display.

After noting her parents’ approval of the summer care basket she’d sent, Kutone had taken to the idea of crafting seasonal baskets for the townspeople of Stardew Valley. And boy were they a hit—smiles and thank-yous and invitations to dinner all around. Hopefully, George—infamous as the town grump—wouldn’t break that pattern.

Alex leaned over, whispering into Kutone’s ear. “Relax,” he said. “The last time you brought a bunch of veggies for Grandma, Grandpa lapped up the stew she made like it was water in a dog bowl.”

“That was when I was naïve, Alex,” Kutone replied. “When I thought it was just cute to deliver some goods from the farm, but this—this is real. Real judgments on my real accomplishments.”

“Trust me, he won’t have anything bad to say. That’s why he’s taking so long.” Alex eased his weight off Kutone’s shoulder, and nudged her toward the corridor. “We’ll hang out in my room until Grandpa figures it out.”

Kutone had always considered herself fairly sharp, especially in the realm of recognizing another party’s interest. Of course, some people—like Sebastian, she absently thought—having mastered aloofness to the point of unreadability, stumped her to oblivion. If she tried guessing any interest in those types of people, she attributed the interest to her own projections instead. Then, other people made the task mind-numbingly simple. Rhei, for instance, had never quieted his flirtatious silver tongue in the two and a half years they’d worked together as exec and assistant.

Alex, on the other hand, really liked touching her. He wisely avoided her face, finally scabbing and peeling from her abuse in the mines, but her shoulders and the top of her head seemed fair game for an affectionate pat. Though she protested—“I’m not Dusty, for crying out loud,”—he seemed more entertained than dissuaded by her scolding. So when he tentatively slid his hand down her tender shoulder, her bandaged arm, and gently held her wrist as he guided her to his room, Kutone had to pull back. Hard.
“I’m only waiting for your grandfather’s appraisal,” she said. “I can’t stay long.”

She’d learned this type of intense guarding back in the city, at around the time she received the notice for her hefty demotion. Almost the entire building had heard the rumors, and within the first few weeks after her demotion, she couldn’t walk around the grounds without seeing a covered simper or disappointed shake of the head. Especially toxic, were the people who acted like they saw nothing wrong with Kutone’s situation, and smiled and laughed like they were her new best friends, only to turn around and stab her later with “So did you offer to fuck him for your promotion, or are you going to say it was his idea?” or “Talk about no remorse, you slut.”

Alex smiled almost like they did.

Yet she also knew when a friendly grin was truly authentic, when, at her sudden defensiveness, it dissolved into a confused frown, then deep thought, like Alex’s then. “Oh.” Alex released his grip, and pressed a closed fist to his heart. “Give me a little more credit, Kutone. Or I’ll start calling you Farm Girl again.”

So then her next thoughts naturally went to figuring out “why.” Why did certain people invite her in with kindness and respect? Why did people even decide to associate with her, if not for her body? It was the same question she was never able to answer regarding Rhei, but she decided against voicing her thoughts, instead replying, “Then I’ll start thinking of you as an arrogant bastard again.”

“Hey! That actually stings, you know!” He opened the door to his room and dragged over a pair of his shoes to prop it open. Still in good humor, he ushered Kutone inside. “Just make sure you don’t trip over any of the bars,” he said. “I’m pretty sure I could carry you all the way to Harvey’s, but you already look messed up enough. Let’s try to not make it worse for you.”

She cast a glare down on him, as she neatly stepped over a set of the aforementioned bars. More than the bars, however, she saw herself more likely to trip over the dents and scratches in the flooring, left behind by weights of myriad sizes. Luckily, Alex had opened his curtains and windows to their fullest, allowing the autumn sunshine and breeze to filter through and light up his room. His faded sports-themed wallpaper needed a serious update, but a certain fondness—the light of old, happy childhood memories—permeated the air. It matched Alex well, but the brightness unnerved Kutone. Like a shadow out of place. As she stroked the ends of one of her ponytails, she wrinkled her nose, and fought to hide her frown.

Alex worked to move his weights out of the way. “Geez,” he started, “you have a damn good sense of smell, don’t you?”

Now that he mentioned it… “Ah, yes,” said Kutone, “the rancid odor of fresh man sweat. At least it’s without hair gel, else I would have actually dry-heaved.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, but,” Alex jumped to his feet. “You don’t smell the gel ‘cause I quit using it.”

Kutone blinked. “Did you really?”

“You can actually feel hair now. Try it.”

At first, she considered it. There definitely was a more natural crimp and bounce to Alex’s brown hair, and it even moved with the breeze. Tempting, she thought, until she further considered the casual settle. Again, she frowned—perfection in casualty was Rhei’s field of expertise. He had eschewed gel, choosing only a sprinkle of water to muss his hair into a semblance of his ideal image: Your Cool and Capable Friend. Kutone shook her head, partly to purge her thoughts, and partly to reject Alex’s statement. “Considering your sweat’s probably staining your hardwood flooring as we
speak, your hair’s probably sponging it up too. Right?”

“Fair enough,” Alex laughed back. “But that’s your loss.”

“Oh trust me, I don’t think I’m missing out on a lot.” Talking to Alex, she realized her voice had taken on an old, indifferent tone she had adopted once upon a time, when she and Rhei were simple partners in business. According to him, she’d seized his coolness for herself, made him “uncool”—much to Rhei’s delight—and their partnership had brought many successful deals under the Joja wing. Somehow, they generated a positive air with their back-and-forth quips, mastered to an art form.

To step back into those shoes again choked her with nostalgia, but in that same instance, she found the light in Alex’s room too blinding. She wondered when George would finish his impromptu appraisal.

Alex, conversely, relaxed on the floor at the far end of his room, and leaned back against the side of his bed. “I’m kinda glad you stopped by, actually,” he said. “Been wanting to talk to you.”

Kutone sat against the wall closest to the door, as a new nervousness lurched in her stomach. What now? Talking to each other across the room like this—just like a conference room at the top of a high-rise office building. Luckily, Alex’s expression forecasted nothing so ominous, but he seemed to have a hard time collecting his thoughts. So, letting her bandaged arm relax on the floor, she turned a curious look to him. “Well, I’m here. What are you thinking about?”

“A few things,” he slowly started. “First, well…” He averted his eyes from her straight gaze, and clenched his hands together. “I know we joke about it now, me calling you Farm Girl and all—but I’m sorry about that.”

She hadn’t expected the conversation to turn into a confessional. Dark eyes slightly wide, she motioned with a shrug. “You didn’t know my name was all that was,” she said.

“The fact you’re giving me the benefit of the doubt makes this sting more, y’know. Truth is, I did know. Mayor Lewis told us all before you moved in to the valley, but then I saw you, this sad, thin little thing fresh from the city, and I dunno what came over me—I had to tease you a little. Get some kind of smile out of you. Or maybe I wanted to impress you.”

Kutone snickered. “‘Hey Farm Girl, when I go pro, you can officially call yourself my first fan.’”

“Stop,” Alex replied, grimacing. “‘Rude’ doesn’t even start to explain how much of an arrogant bastard I was to you. I’m really sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” said Kutone. “I didn’t know this was eating you up so bad.”

“Well, that’s what happens when you start really getting to know someone.” Alex heaved his broad shoulders in a deep exhale. “The more I heard you talking, the more we talked, even, the more I got it that you were this incredibly smart, strong woman that I had no right or place to strut around. I mean, there you were, in the middle of beatdown-hot summer, on that beach rebuilding a broken bridge no one bothered to even look at, and I was just, I dunno…dumb.”

After their talk at the community park, Kutone had already revised her mental notes to include confirmation on Alex’s insecurity. This, however, was direr than she initially suspected. “Hey, lay off on that,” she replied. “You helped me out on that project awful lot.”

“See? That! That, right there!” Alex leaned forward, his eyes bright. “You’re so damn nice to me when everyone else keeps their distance. You talk to me like I’m actually worth something, and I
just…”

The implied continuation of Alex’s faltered words hit Kutone like a punch to the face. Rhei once had that same breathless expression, when he demanded the rest of his work canceled for the evening, and drove down the wrong turnoff for an impromptu dinner—this is a date, by the way, Caramel. The words that he desperately whispered after that, in their darkened hotel room as he shrugged off his perfect suit and undid the buttons of her blouse, still stirred a painful tingle at the curved bottom of Kutone’s gut. Don’t say it, she willed Alex, please don’t say it.

He never took his eyes off Kutone—he was about to say it, but then, shaking his head, said, “You mind if I sit next to you?”

She barely controlled the shudder of her relieved breath, as she gestured to the spot next to her.

“Your house.”

It wasn’t that she didn’t like him. And it wasn’t his smell, either. He was pleasant in that regard, cologne light and fresh. The everyday girl would have paled in jealousy at Kutone’s position: the shoulder of her collared red flannel brushing against the suede of Alex’s green jacket. Close enough Alex could reach around her shoulders and stroke the long violet strands of her hair, were he so courageous. Close enough Kutone could lean her head on his shoulder, were she so inclined.

She made no move to close the rest of that tiny distance.

“You know,” Alex then said, voice soft, “I’ve been inspired by you. I want to get to your level.” He nodded to his bookcase. “Grandma told me you graduated from university. I gotta do the same right?”

“Only if it’s what you want to do,” Kutone replied. “You’d have to sacrifice your sports card for a nerd card.”

“I…” He closed his eyes, thinking hard. “I get nervous, even thinking about opening a book. It’s so bad that I’ve given up on community college as a way for recruiters to find me—fucking stupid, right?”

Kutone folded her hands together again, as she dropped her gaze from Alex’s faded wallpaper, to the worn floorboards. “People will criticize your choices,” she murmured, “no matter what you do.”

After a moment’s thought, Alex sighed. “Then I should take up studying again, right? Won’t it be worth it, if I can be an equal to you?”

Kutone shook her head. “For you? Probably not. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, Alex. Besides, here we are, talking like regular old friends—I don’t see how much more equal we could get.”

“You’re probably right.” There it was again, that desperate, I can’t wait anymore look she remembered with a painful twinge. Rhei’s features overwrote Alex’s in those moments.

She left a punch on his shoulder, hoping to dissipate his tension, and break the reflection. “You focus on going pro,” she said. “That’s what you decided to do, right? And your chances are still good?”

“Course.”

Kutone levered herself up off the floor. “Then I’ll keep believing in you. C’mon, I gotta see if George’s done with that basket.” More than anything, she wanted out. Alex’s mannerisms mirrored Rhei’s far too vividly, and if she stayed any longer, she risked punching poor Alex in the face. After
all, it was already too late to stop the panicked palpitations that flared her chest in alternating waves of icy heat.

He stood up with her, taking her wrist again. “Maybe,” Alex swallowed, “maybe we could get dinner sometime. Do this talking-as-equals thing more. You tell me about your smart people stuff and I’ll try to keep up.”

Dinner. Always fucking dinner. And dinner would lead to Something Else, and Kutone would agree sleeping with Alex sounded delicious, but how would that be any different from sleeping with Rhei? Falling in love with Rhei? Again? Be gentle, Kutone told herself. Let him off easy, he doesn’t know your circumstances like some others do. She tried to smile, but she couldn’t force anything past her strained expression.

It was enough of a response for Alex. He released Kutone’s wrist from his grasp, as he regarded Kutone’s eyes, and the words to her strain. “I’ll think about it,” she murmured. “But don’t hold your breath.”
...Thoughts.

Chapter Notes

Edit 5/17/2018: I've been alerted that the scene at the end of this chapter can be considered dubcon. Please consider this your warning for touches and fantasizing, if that type of material makes ya uncomfortable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A clear Tuesday morning, one week before the Stardew Valley Fair and the grange display, saw Kutone outside at the top of the mountain road, pulling on the end of a wooden banquet table until her heels dug little potholes into the dirt. Though Robin pushed from the other side, and the table’s feet made promising drags through the dirt clearing, the damn thing still weighed a ton between them.

“Robin,” Kutone panted, “where’s your help when you need them?”

“Help?” Robin scoffed back. “From the noodle arms of a biologist, an engineer, and a programmer?”

They stopped to catch their breaths. Kutone turned her head to the sky. “Fair enough,” she finally replied. “Guess it’s up to us then.”

Between carpenter and farmer, they mustered a second wind, and through their sweating, grunting, and cursing, lugged the long table out and around into the mountaintop clearing. Their monumental task finished, they collapsed onto the ground, limbs trembling.

Kutone blew sweat from her over-long bangs. “So why this table and not something lighter?”

They were setting up for a little potluck, featuring produce from Breezy Banks, and signature dishes from participating families. Jodi, mother to Sam and little Vincent, apparently made a godly fish casserole. Marnie, bringing Jas as Vincent’s playmate, promised a rhubarb pie for dessert. Caroline, arriving with Abigail and Pierre, volunteered a vegetable stir-fry. And Robin, who went all aglow upon seeing the pumpkin in Kutone’s gift basket, had invited Kutone over to learn her specialty: a creamy pumpkin soup. “Like our own little autumn feast!” Robin had exclaimed, “and it’ll be a great chance for all of us to get together, relax, and really welcome you into the community!”

Kutone just couldn’t say no to Robin’s enthusiasm, and contentedly came up the mountain road early to help with the setup.

Robin untied and readjusted her high ponytail, as she snorted back, “Maybe I wanted to show off my work at the same time we feature yours!”

“The basket’s just a seasonal gift, not the grange display.”

“Oh, honey, let me school you a little on presentation, how a beautiful piece of craftsmanship like this,” Robin cast a flourishing wave over the table, with its carved flower and wave motifs along its curved legs and rounded edges, “will bring out the charm of your fare.”

Kutone laughed. “That’ll be your cooking doing that.” She looked up at the high autumn sky again.
Not a single cloud hung over the valley. “And the air, and the people here. Nothing on my part, to be honest.”

Robin planted a sharp nudge in Kutone’s side. “You’re just as self-deprecating as Sebastian sometimes,” she said. “If you’d kindly quit that and help me start that soup? We’ll get the torches up later.”

Quelling a small laugh at Robin’s candor, Kutone followed her inside. They passed the shop’s front desk, rounded the corner of the corridor at Demetrius’s laboratory, and continued on. All the while, Robin prattled on about her plans for the upcoming evening—maybe I can have Maru start on the torches, and have Demetri help her out, that way I can maybe get Sebby to join us in the kitchen; he’ll probably light up a little if I tell him it’s pumpkin soup tonight; oh but he did say he’d be working today…

“So,” Kutone started, “this sounds like, even with a biologist, an engineer, and a programmer in the house, the carpenter is still the brains of household operations?”

Robin hefted the pumpkin from the floor of her kitchen, and dropped it onto an oven pan with a loud clatter. “You’ll learn all about it,” she replied, “once you become a mom. Start the oven for me? We have to let this roast a bit.”

“We’re not picking the seeds out first?”

“For efficiency’s sake, and while I don’t mind splinters, I hate slime. Don’t tell Demetrius I said that; he’s real particular about their biological anomalies.”

Sometimes, despite Robin’s general cheerfulness, her casual remarks regarding her family carried troubled undertones. And judging from Sebastian’s passivity and detachment from even his own mother, their schism probably ran a lot deeper than Kutone imagined.

As Kutone slid the pumpkin-mounted tray into the oven, Robin, fully engaged in Cooking Mom mode, lifted the lid on a simmering pot on the stove. According to her, part of the secret to a good pumpkin soup was a good vegetable stock. She dipped a ladle into the bubbling concoction of onions, celery, carrots, leeks, mushrooms, and other indeterminate bits and ends of herbs and vegetables. “Haven’t done this in a while,” she admitted, throwing in salt and pepper. “Both Maru and Sebby are at the age where I don’t really need to do this for them anymore.”

“Demetrius isn’t a ‘I love my wife’s home-cooked meals’ type of husband?”

“You should hear him go on about cellular biology in the breakdown of food—meals are more of a necessity than an enjoyment for him.”

Robin replaced the lid on the pot, and sat down at the kitchen table, Kutone across from her. “Of course, don’t get me wrong, he always kisses the cook.” With a smile, she tapped her cheek. “I know he’s grateful. Demetrius is a sweetheart.

“At the same time, it’s all kind of strange for me, Kutone. I get the feeling we’re really building a family here, and yet, I still feel like I’m worlds apart from him sometimes.”

She gestured to an empty fruit bowl on the kitchen table. “You know, I ask him to buy fruits at Pierre’s, and he brings home tomatoes. Tomatoes are fruits, he insists, botanically classified as berries—and having to explain what I mean is sometimes just…” She sighed.

Exhausting, Kutone mentally finished. She remembered that feeling too, from when she had to choke Rhei’s low-key flirting at business meetings. You’re safe, Rhei, she’d once warned him. I’m not.
Robin leaned against the table, chin cupped in her hand. “I get to thinking,” she went on. “Husband and wife disagreements are a normal thing. Demetrius and I know how to kiss and make up. But for someone like Sebastian, Demetrius must be a nightmare.”

Kutone unconsciously cast a glance in the direction of the corridor. “You did insinuate a few times,” she said, “that their relationship isn’t the best.”

“If only it were that simple of an explanation.” Robin suddenly perked up, and releasing a heavy exhale, brightened her features again. “Let’s head to the workshop. We’ll do those torches ourselves, and you can tell me a little about being friends with Sebby.”

The pumpkin and the stock, Robin explained, needed about an hour each, which gave them plenty of time to both gather their resources and work together on the braziers for the potluck. As they put together and set up four in the corners of the mountaintop clearing, Robin regained her cheerfulness. “So be honest,” she challenged, “and lay this poor mom’s worries to rest. Is he smoking?”

With the way the smell of spent tobacco faintly clung to his sweatshirt, Kutone was astounded Robin had to ask. Then again, she thought, Sebasitan was immensely secretive with his habit—smoking only in the evening, and far enough away from the house no one would probably notice. “Why do you think he is?”

“Oh, Kutone, answering a question with a question only makes me more nervous.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “I found an ashtray in his room,” she said. “And sometimes I get a whiff of it when he walks by, but it’s so light I think it’s my imagination more than anything.”

“Well,” replied Kutone, tightening the twine around a brazier’s struts, “I know some people use ashtrays as decorations, and I used to get the smell on me all the time by secondhand.”

For a short while, Robin silently regarded Kutone with a suspicious side-long glare, until she finally opened her mouth again. “You’re not covering for him, are you?”

“What benefit would I get out of that?”

“A young lady like you, with a young man like Sebastian? Anything, really.”

For one instant, she was back at Joja, with the women simpering behind their hands, and the men jeering across the room. Kutone stood up from their work, hands suddenly clammy. “Robin,” she icily replied, “if I were covering for him, it’s because I want to respect his privacy. Give me a little more credit.”

Robin seemed to realize she’d struck a nerve, and stood up in alarm. “Oh no,” she sighed, “I didn’t mean anything serious by it.” She clutched Kutone by her shoulders. “Listen, I still don’t know anything about your life before Pelican Town, but I’m sorry if I said something insensitive. Really!”

At least she apologized. That was more than Kutone could ever have asked for back in the city. No one apologized for their ignorance or blatant selfishness there. “It’s fine,” came her habitual reply. “Kutone…” The cheer had left Robin’s voice again, but she went on. A hint of optimism echoed in her words. “You see,” she said, “I do have a reason: I get the feeling Sebby likes you. A lot.”

As Kutone turned wide eyes to Robin, she hurriedly waved away the comment. “Just my Meddling Mom and Nosy Friend instincts! I know he’s picky about his friends, so when I see him cheering up a little whenever we mention your name, I know that means you’ve become someone he at least tolerates. I was hoping you could be my mole into his soul.”
Kutone tried to reason with the pattering in a small corner of her chest. Just friends, she told herself, Robin only meant it as just friends.

But what if, that same corner whispered back, she meant it as something more?

She swallowed down the rest of her wandering thoughts, and with it, the creeping flush blooming in her cheeks. Luckily, with Robin ahead of her as they went back inside the house, Kutone’s reaction went totally undetected, as she replied, “I guess that’s another mom thing I’ll learn if I have kids?”

“When you have kids!” Robin corrected. “You can’t help worrying about their secrets and their friends and you just want to get in the know of everything they do, and yet all you really can do is step back and wait for them to come to you. Most of the time, they don’t.”

“It’s kind of sobering, to be honest.”

Kids. Rhei used to fantasize about having a family. Just two, he used to say, and relatively close in age to allow for his extended paternity leave, alongside Kutone’s maternity leave. To which she used to wrinkle her nose and respond, “Over my dead body.” To think, marriage had been on the table for them, when he visited her apartment with the spare key she’d given him, and in his faded t-shirt and sweatpants, he crawled underneath her covers and held her close for the entire night. So much for that.

Strange. Usually, when these fleeting thoughts came to her, emotion swelled, flared, and exploded in suffocating waves. This time, she felt almost nothing.

It had to be Sebastian. After opening up to him, on that evening by the mountainside lake, Kutone’s thoughts on Rhei no longer burned through her. Somehow, Sebastian’s listening ear had killed her anger, leaving only a dull ache whenever Rhei snuck into her thoughts again.

“Sobering, huh?” she echoed, and placed her hands on her hips. “Then I guess we’ll have to drink up tonight,” she said. “After we finish the soup.”

That evening, by the light of Robin’s and Kutone’s braziers, and Abigail’s and Caroline’s mini jack-o-lanterns, the mini potluck received more visitors than initially intended. Small town talk, Kutone supposed, but at least the extra guests brought their own contributions as well. Surprisingly, the favors went beyond extra chips or unnecessary stacks of cups or paper plates—Emily, who noted Haley stayed behind because “Alex wasn’t feeling too well,” brought a red vegetable dish that complemented Caroline’s green. Mayor Lewis brought a casserole dish of piping hot eggplant parmesan, and even Shane, who swore Jas had pressed him to go and he only came for the possible drink, added a plate of pepper poppers to the table.

Kutone raised her fourth glass of wine to him. “From Joja with love?” she said, snickering.

Shane, languidly blinking through his five-o-clock shadow, raised his stein of pumpkin ale in return. “Piss off,” he replied. “It’s the recipe I sent you but you never tried it out for me.”

She’d gotten used to the townspeople’s quirks. While Kutone hesitated to call them friends, she hoped they at least considered her decent company. “I’ve been busy with the farm,” she said, taking a sip of wine. “Cut me some slack.”

“I’ll do that when you try it out.”

She pushed off the wall she leaned against, and ambled to the table. “Done,” she said, picking up a
fork and spearing a popper, “and done.” At the first delicious crunch of pepper in her mouth, however, she winced, dropped her fork, and pressed her hand against her mouth. “Oh. Oh, it literally fucking burns!”

Shane cracked a grizzled, rare smile. “The more to enjoy your wine with, isn’t it?”

While Kutone downed her wine and, at the angry sear in her mouth, instantly regretted it the next moment, Abigail approached as she perused the potluck table. She held a bowl of Robin’s pumpkin soup in her hands. “Geez, Kutone, need some help there?”

“Milk,” Kutone coughed back, “cream, ice water, anything—!”

Abigail took Kutone’s wine glass and pushed the bowl into her hands. “Plenty of cream in that one, Seb told me so. Let it sit in your mouth a bit.”

She took a mouthful of the soup, allowing the warm, creamy pumpkin to coat her mouth for a few blessed seconds. Then finally swallowing, Kutone wiped aside her tears. “Saved,” she sighed. “And it’s really good too.”

Abigail grinned. “Well, she used the pumpkin you grew at the Banks, right? You bet it’s good.”

Taking her wine glass back, Kutone made a light smile. “You’re just saying that as a pumpkin fan.”

“Was it obvious?”

“Not everyone requests a fresh pumpkin at the first signs of autumn, you know.”

Abigail turned back to the table, continuing her perusal of the food. “I had to call dibs first,” she explained. “I mean, the valley takes the pumpkin season real seriously. And since your pumpkins got instantly popular with those baskets, I think I placed my order at a smart time.”

“That’s not untrue. People have been wondering at me about winter baskets already.”

“Oooh, you better make them good then.” She leaned closer and whispered, “Seb’s birthday’s in the winter. Sam and I can help you decide on something for him.”

Why were people so suggestive about her relationship with Sebastian? There is none, thought Kutone, but thank goodness for the clearing’s dim lighting, else Abigail would have seen Kutone’s ears turning red. She refilled her glass and took another sip, preparing to blame the heat in her cheeks on Shane’s peppers and the wine. “You mean you want my help in deciding what to get for him.”

“Partly yes, partly no.” Abigail wore an uncertain expression, and glanced back over her shoulder to where her two friends stood apart from the festivities. She appeared to shoot Sam a shrug, and turned back to Kutone. “So if you decide to do winter baskets, let us know—and keep the holly out, I’m totally fine without breaking out in hives this year.”

“You trying to get her to do winter baskets, Ab?” Sam, with Sebastian trailing behind him, approached as though Abigail’s shrug had summoned him. “Dunno what she could put in it, though.”

“That’s why I’m saying we could help her figure it out.”

It was the Moonlight Jellies all over again, with Abigail and Sam pouncing on Kutone with ideas and suggestions, and Sebastian remaining quiet. Although he tuned in to the conversation, he occupied himself more with his own bowl of pumpkin soup.
Abigail and Sam, however, kept casting cursory looks in Sebastian’s direction, as if gauging his reactions to their conversation.

“Stuff from the mines?” Sam ventured. “People like all the pretty gems you can find there.”

“That’s for someone like me, dummy, people who like adventures and mining.”

No reaction.

“What about a wine basket, Kutone?” Abigail tried next. “Since you’ve been drinking nothing but wine this entire time.”

“Yeah!” Sam agreed. “And it’s good to enjoy with someone else, like an S.O. or a best friend!”

Initially, no reaction from Sebastian, but Kutone grimaced. She sipped on her wine again, a stupor finally starting to settle over her. “I do like drinking it,” she replied, “but—but I have some history with like…wine itself. Like, a someone, and wine.”

A knowing flinch this time. Sam and Abigail quickly moved on.

“Artisan goods!” said Abigail. “Like jelly, mayonnaise, pickles—stuff that everyone usually buys from Joja Mart, but better because it’d from the Banks.”

“Gross and gross on the last two,” Sam replied. “When food’s sour, that means it’s bad. I don’t get why people put that stuff on sandwiches. It’s all about cheese and marinara sauce.”

“That’s—that’s a pizza,” said Kutone. How many had she had so far? Two—three bottles worth? Good food and good people made the wine taste even better, and when the wine tasted good, pretty boys looked even prettier. She sensibly kept her eyes down, though, already cognizant of her unraveling speech. God forbid she started slurring. Hopefully Sam and Abigail would keep the conversation between them.

But damn her drunken mouth and her then-voracious need to talk to Sebastian. “That’s—that’s the pumpkin soup, right?” She paused, struggling to rein in her loose tongue. “Robin showed me how to make it. What do you—what do you think?”

Sam and Abigail went dead silent as Sebastian finally looked up from his bowl. He stifled a laugh at Kutone’s bleary expression, and replied, “I think it’s the best one she’s made so far.”

Ignoring Sam’s warning nudge in her side, Abigail piped up. “I told her it’s because Robin used a pumpkin from the Banks.”

“Could be true,” said Sebastian. “She made this soup one year with Joja pumpkins. Never again.”

Kutone searched the table for another bottle of wine, hoping to fill her glass before Sebastian could tell the difference between drunk flush and embarrassed blush. “Of course—of course—my pumpkin’s gonna be better. Joja’s got—Joja’s got nothin’ on me.”

After choking down another laugh, Sebastian set his bowl aside and gently pried Kutone’s fingers off her glass. “Maybe you should stop for tonight.”

Alcohol had an interesting way of taking the most mundane sensations and weaving them into a magical haze. His touch both burned and cooled on her skin, the more she focused her remaining attention on her hand. He smelled of fresh linen, but the tell-tale undertone of spent cigarettes stirred a different kind of drunkenness in Kutone, this time in that hollow part of her body that insisted it
remembered good feelings. If she had taken that one last drink, Sebastian’s scent alone would have unhinged the last of her decency. So thank goodness he stopped her. And his voice—admonishing, yet somehow reassuring, low like they shared some deep secret, but still in the normal tone of a regular friend.

She scraped up her fading dignity, and nodded. “Can I?—I just need a nap.” She swayed, adding one more time with her cracking voice, “A little nap.”

“Feel free to crash. I’ll get you some water.”

Though she didn’t quite remember ambling inside Robin’s house and collapsing onto the couch, that was exactly where Kutone faded back into reality. She thought for a few seconds about pushing herself up off the cushions melded so perfectly against her body and making the journey back to the Banks, but two—three bottles of wine weighed a body down like a sack of bricks in water. How long had she slept, anyway? The night outside was almost pitch black, but the lights were still on inside the house. Someone had thankfully dimmed the lights where Kutone slept, but a different brightness filtered down the corridor.

And there were voices. Angry men’s voices.

“All I’m asking for, Sebastian, is a little bit more forethought and consideration.”

“She’s a guest, Demetrius! A guest who never needed to come up and help out; she’s tired!”

“A guest that I’ve also expressed concerns about to both you and your mother.”

“Which still makes no fucking sense—!”

“Sebastian!”

“Sorry, Mom! But you have to back me up on at least that much!”

A moment’s silence, then Robin spoke up again. “She did help me out, a lot,” she slowly began. “And I had so much fun working with her today, Demetrius. I understand your concerns about her, but I’m also glad Sebby let her stay to rest.”

Oh. Oh. She was causing the row right now. An uncomfortable lurch folded in Kutone’s stomach, but her body still wouldn’t move. She squeezed her eyes shut and willed herself to get up, but even turning on her side made the world spin.

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Demetrius, “I would rather her be alert and sober on her way back home, and I do agree it was a good idea to let her rest, but I wish you would have communicated that to us—!”

“Oh,” Sebastian groaned, “we’re doing this again? My lack of communication is causing trouble for everyone here?”

“Sebastian, if you’d let me finish my thought.”

“I don’t understand what else you have to make clear,” Sebastian snapped back. “You don’t like her. Fine. You want her out. That’s fine too. And apparently, I’ve also screwed this up again. That’s not news, either.”
Even through her languid haze, Kutone registered an ache bubbling to the surface of her thoughts. *It’s not you,* she mouthed through dry lips and tongue. *Oh, Sebastian, it’s not you, it was never you.*

“Again, Sebastian,” Demetrius urged, calm but exhausted. “You are not giving me a chance to express myself. I am okay with Kutone resting off her alcohol here. In fact, I would have welcomed it, had you told me first.”

“This is getting nowhere.” Another pause, followed by Sebastian’s glum remark. “You could easily kick her out now, then. Wake her up. Tell her ‘sorry, there was a miscommunication with Sebastian, and we can’t really accommodate for you right now.’ I bet she’d smile, apologize, and rush on home. You know she’d do that.”

It was exactly what she had to do then, but her insides spun and swam with her vision. Likely the wine, but guilt was also a massive part of her nausea. *I’m sorry. Just a few more minutes, and I can—*

Sebastian’s icy tone cut through Kutone’s thoughts. “Not that I’d let you do that either. I live in this house too, and she’s—I really—I know that she had a good time today, and I wanted her to go home feeling good instead of shitty and unwanted. Like I do all the time.

“No, I’m not letting you do that to her.”

For a time, silence settled over the house, as Sebastian’s words sank in. Robin never rebuked him for his language, and Demetrius was either too exhausted to continue the discussion, or out of arguments. Then, low, undiscernible voices muttered back and forth, finally ending with Sebastian’s resigned, “I need some time alone.”

The considerate thing to do, Kutone thought as Sebastian’s steps echoed down the corridor, would be to act like she just woke, and feign cluelessness on her way to the door. But the haze of her alcoholic stupor, plus the assurance of Sebastian’s defense, pressed her languid body down for the final time, and just as she heard Sebastian’s door close behind him, her heavy eyelids sank back shut, Demetrius be damned.

For Sebastian, on the other hand, sleep had fizzled out in the buzz of his aggravation. He threw open the drawer underneath his computer desk, and rummaged through the notes and pens unceremoniously crammed inside. *Come on,* he thought, breath catching in his chest, *I stashed it in here…*

Frustration soon saw him yanking out the drawer in its entirety, and upending its contents onto the floor. Kicking aside the mess, his hand finally clenched around the wayward paper box, with its crinkling plastic wrap he’d yet to take off. He cursed himself, wondering how he could have thought the evening could go by without needing to light up. Because Kutone was around and her quiet understanding of him had inspired him to try to quit? He scoffed at himself, rattling the box in his hand for reassurance.

Still a few left. Just hearing them rolling inside the box injected a small dose of relief in him. Now he needed to get out.

Pocketing his half-empty box of cigarettes, Sebastian strode back to his door. Stopped with his hand on the doorknob. Make sure, he told himself, to not wake her up on the way out. He guessed she already had, once, during Demetrius’s *talk,* and hoped she’d fallen back asleep without overhearing a lot. The last thing Sebastian wanted to see that evening was Kutone’s habitual despondence, that
look she got when her demons started gnawing through her again.

Part of him grudgingly understood Demetrius’s concern. After all, he’d made his distrust of Kutone clear after that rainy day at the beginning of autumn, so finding her asleep, in the middle of sobering up, in his own home had likely rattled him. With her history thrown into question, her other habits became concerning by association. If, for instance, Kutone’s drunken tendencies started mirroring Shane’s—tendencies that town rumor claimed got him checked in to Harvey’s on more than one occasion—Demetrius would never put up with it. What if she started feeling sick? Or spouted inappropriate tantrums and slurs?

But the shop front, still dimmed for Kutone, remained totally quiet. She slept peacefully, without a single sickened groan, retch, or drunken snore. No acknowledgment of the heated family talk, or his vehement childishness in that moment. Thank goodness.

He shook out a cigarette, and slid it behind his ear on his way to the door, but halfway across, he turned to Kutone, shoulders rising and falling with her sleeping breath.

What does she look like, he thought with a pang, when she’s asleep?

Sliding the box back into his pocket, Sebastian crept over to the couch, and leaned over her as he held his breath.

She seemed to sleep most comfortably on her side, with her hair still tied in her signature twin tails. One fell over shoulder, while the other trailed behind her and dipped toward the floor. Her lips were slightly apart, and blew slight breaths onto her too-long bangs, locks of hair that threatened to creep into her mouth and nose if no one helped her.

He tentatively lifted his hand over her, but stopped. What if she woke up now? How would he explain his almost touching her face? Would she be okay with him touching her? Better yet, was he allowed to touch her while she slept?

He swallowed down the nervous hammering in his chest and withdrew his hand. Better safe than sorry, he thought, but now that he stood over her, he couldn’t step away. Listening to her easy breath, watching her entire body rise and settle in sleep—he swore he could stay forever.

She groaned and drew herself into a tight curl, breaking Sebastian’s trance for just one moment. Right, a blanket. The chill of deep autumn night had settled in the valley, and bit especially harsh on the mountaintop. But did the house have any spare blankets? Probably not, considering Demetrius apparently hated having guests stay the night.

Maybe mine?

He swallowed again. He’d just done his laundry, so there was no worry about the cleanliness of his comforter. And, a clean comforter meant whoever slept in it next would infuse her scent into its seams. Kutone’s scent, he thought, her clean, earthy scent like spring rain, and the dewy aroma of flowering fruits—in his own comforter? He rubbed his nose and sauntered back to his room, where he overenthusiastically yanked the comforter off his bed and gathered it in his arms.

Boldness crept into Sebastian then, as he draped his comforter over Kutone. He pulled and tweaked the blanket more times than necessary, and once satisfied with the way it conformed to the contours of her body—kinda like how I could hug her in bed and listen to her talk—he leaned over her again.

As her breath continued to breeze through her hair, Sebastian found himself thinking, again, about her brief expressions of morosity, and the name that lately kept surfacing in those moments. That
Rhei she talked about before—did he ever watch her like this? Did he think about her now, the way Sebastian thought about her on nights like this, when the entire world was dark and quiet and his thoughts prayed fervently for the sound of her voice? Did he plan to win her back, when he inevitably showed up for the Fair?

Did she ever trust Rhei with her demons, the way she’d trusted Sebastian on those nights they watched the night together?

_I hope not._

Sebastian gathered Kutone’s bangs, and gently slid them away from her face. Her forehead and cheek, soft under his fingers, sent a shock of excitement shuddering through his body. He circled his touch around the back of her ear, and trailed his fingers through her hair. The graze of each wavy strand, the soft weight against the palm of his hand, stirred an electric thrum from the top of his head to a fist-sized knot in his stomach. He wished he could touch her more, but he had to stop. He’d already intruded enough.

His brief intrusion, however, had teased out the angry tangle in his chest. Satisfied, and absurdly warm in his sweatshirt, he turned away and sauntered back to his basement. There, he threw his box of cigarettes back into the mess of his upended desk drawer, and pulled off his sweatshirt as he meandered toward his bed. Bare without his comforter, but thankfully so, as he fell forward into the sheets. Laid there, face-down, until he needed air. Rolling over to his back, he pushed his own hair away, letting the cool basement air settle over his flushed face and overheating body.

And for a long few hours after that, sleep eluded Sebastian, as, like other nights like this, he relived that delicious current pulsing through him every time he thought of Kutone. The knot in his stomach slipped lower, tugging rudely, warmly, sensuously. He thought of her hair—cute in twin tails, but gorgeous in those loose waves—woven between his fingers. He thought of her eyes—black-coffee brown and always averted—and that half-lidded look she got when she lost herself in books, the moonlight jellies, the night sky. He thought of her hands—soft to touch yet firm in grip—and his mind’s eye replayed, over and over again, that little twist of her wrist when she tucked a fringe of hair behind her ear.

He saw himself grabbing that wrist, and pressing his lips onto that plush skin, as she traced her touch through his hair, along his ear, his jawline…

And there, his fantasies went crazy, as he imagined her laying on top of him, flush against him so that when she lifted her face, her hair caressed his cheek, and her hooded eyes followed his, and he imagined her sitting up, slowly, bewitching, so that her hands trailed down his body, and the silky locks of her hair cascaded over one shoulder, and as he caressed the smooth skin of her exposed neck, she sat at just the perfect angle that he could feel himself, hard and throbbing against the softness between her legs, and one _please, sebastian_ from her, he would slip so deeply into her, and _oh_, the way she _sighed_ for him, _smiled_ for him, _begged_ for him in that purring moan as she rocked her hips against him—_oh, fuck_…

He opened his eyes, not realizing he’d ever closed them. He exhaled, his breath deep, stuttering, hot, and his entire electrified body pining for her.

_Not yet_, he told himself and the hand down his unzipped pants. Not when she still had a different man’s name staining her lips.

He lifted his pillow over his head and pressed the cool surface against his face. He thought of her voice—_prayed_ for her voice—that mellow, subdued, soothing tone that formed the echoes of a smile when she spoke to him. A smile he lately found himself wishing she entrusted to no one else but him.
How did she *do* this to him?

When, and how, could he do the same to her?

Maybe, he thought, he would begin by first making sure the next day found her okay.

Chapter End Notes

New perspectives are *so* refreshing.

Thanks, as always, for all of the comments, kudos, bookmarks, hits, and *cries of mercy* you all keep sending me for this fic! All part of my complete, nutritious brunch today!

Oh! If you ever want to get in touch with me, head over to my tumblr! My ask box is open, and I'm opening submissions too!
A fog rolled in early next morning, rendering the mountain air nippy as Kutone stirred. She vaguely remembered the altercation she’d overheard, and instantly sat bolt upright.

She didn’t remember the comforter, though, as it fell from her shoulders. Someone must have put it over her last night. Sebastian? The scent of fresh linen, along with the blanket’s black color, easily brought his image to Kutone’s mind.

She rolled her stiff body off the couch, and languidly folded up the comforter. Determined to leave behind as little evidence of her stay as possible—especially knowing she’d inconvenienced Demetrius, Robin, and Sebastian—she refrained from delivering the blanket down to the basement. Sebastian was probably still asleep, after all, and she didn’t want to intrude any longer. And heaven forbid anyone saw her, hair bent at kink-crazed angles, face grimy, breath stained by stale alcohol.

So tucking the folded comforter against the farthest corner of the couch, she crept to the front door, and cautiously excused herself from the house. Later, she thought, she’d come by to apologize to them, when they were hopefully awake and freshened up for the day.

Outside, without the warmth of Sebastian’s comforter around her, Kutone drew her arms around her body. The cold bit through her shirt as she sauntered away from the house, and approached the mountain’s back road leading to the Banks. Overhead, a gray canopy of clouds forecasted rain, and its dewy scent hung in the crisp autumn air. Yet in Kutone’s mind, she was already composing what she hoped formed a suitable apology for her behavior, along with a list of chores she needed done soon.

First, she needed to let Oki out. She could skip watering today, if the rain came. Then she needed to check on the animals: Yogurt and Cocum in the coop, and Daisy and Jazzy inside the barn. If they didn’t have enough feed, she’d have to take a detour to Marnie’s, and then—

Then the rain came, first in a few fat drops, then into an increasing pour. Mercilessly pelted by the rain, Kutone scampered the rest of the way down the path. At least that took care of the crops.

Dashing up the steps of the veranda, she threw open her door, allowing Oki to shoot out like a bullet into the rain. For a while, she watched the big retriever spin circles and bound through the fields, until she turned to her mailbox and noted the red flag standing again. Having already received Lewis’s thorough notice in the mail regarding setup for the Fair’s grange display, Kutone doubted the mayor had sent out a follow-up. Could be Dad, she guessed, or Mom. Could be Evelyn’s cookies, or a bolt of fabric from Emily.

Or it could be Rhei.

Out of obligation, she swiped the envelope—of course a telltale security envelope—out of her mailbox, and stuffed it into her back pocket without looking further. Then, she turned away from the mailbox and pulled her door shut. Waved to Oki as he barked happily from across the river. Animals first, she thought. Then her apology to Robin, Demetrius, and Sebastian. Maru too, if she’d been awake to overhear the conversation. And then maybe, just maybe, she’d be willing to crack open the envelope and see what was inside.
Either way, she first needed a long walk.

Oki yipped and bounced at Kutone’s heels, as he ran ahead down the path, then back to his master again. One evening without her seemed to have instilled a minor form of separation anxiety, and he’d done nothing but bark, whimper, and yip intense conversation since she came back in the morning. Despite the rain, he happily accepted Kutone’s loving rubs and pats every time he bounded back to her side, and even rolled along the muddy path while waiting for her to catch up.

The muddy prints on Kutone’s clothes would usually have been grounds for chastisement, but with the rain coming down so hard, the dirt flowed away before she could scold her companion. He’d get his own bath back home, anyway, as sufficient karma for his overexcited behavior.

With rain plastering her hair into saturated locks, and sticking her clothes to her body, Kutone continued her walk with Oki down to the beach. Colds be damned, she thought, even though she shivered at the chilling air lifting from the sea. Oki raced along the beach, churning clouds of wet sand behind him as he ran one way, then back. His paw tracks surfaced in the sand one moment, then disappeared within seconds as the rain dashed out the evidence.

Kutone stopped on the sand, long enough that Oki finally settled down and trotted back to her side. Her thoughts, with the rain massaging the top of her head, went back to the night before. Demetrius had cracked down on Sebastian, when the concern and mistrust had been over her.

She absently scratched the top of Oki’s head.

It wasn’t unfounded, she thought, considering the suspicion she’d fostered in Demetrius. And maybe she’d done that on purpose, as a check on herself. Rein in herself before she did any damage to Robin or Sebastian.

But even that careful, unconscious calculation had backfired, onto Sebastian, of all people.

Kutone, sitting on the sand with her legs tucked underneath, sighed. “Messied it up again, Oki,” she said, draping a tight hug around the sodden retriever. “They could have kicked me out and I wouldn’t have been mad.”

*I live in this house too, and she’s—I really—I know that she had a good time today, and I wanted her to go home feeling good instead of shitty and unwanted. Like I do all the time.*

What did Sebastian think of saying at first, before he cut himself off twice in a row?

And his melancholy had been the mask for his hurt—shitty and unwanted—yet he’d superseded Kutone’s feelings before his own. Again. What a guy. It was certainly more than Rhei had mustered at their critical hour, and that fact alone struck her. Dazed her. She lifted her face to the sky, allowing the rain to drum against her cheeks as gratitude welled in the hollow of her body.

Gratitude, and—

Not yet, she told herself. She wouldn’t put words to it yet.

She did, however, admit, hands plastered to her face, “Here we go again. Taking and taking and never giving back, am I?”

Oki’s warning barks snapped Kutone out of her thoughts. She scrabbled to her feet and followed her dog’s gaze, across the repaired bridge to the easternmost end of the shore. Beyond the shoals and tide
pools of the beach, along with washed-up shells and broken bits of coral, nothing extraordinary jumped to her attention. Yet Oki kept up his growling and barking, even through Kutone’s whispered assurances and shushing.

“You see something there, huh?”

She hadn’t tested out that theory yet, about the old ghost appearing on the eastern shore.

Dragging Oki away from the bridge and tying him under the cover of trees, Kutone wiped her drenched hair away from her eyes, and crunched through the wet sand once more. As before, the repaired bridge held her weight as she crossed, and on the other side, the shoals continued to overflow. Still nothing, she thought, yet a sudden chill had her shivering as she walked further along the beach. She drew her arms around herself again.

“Ay, lassie,” a rasping voice whispered into her ear, “ye be lookin’ a mite miserable.”

Kutone whirled around in place, but couldn’t find the source of the voice. She shivered harder, as the voice let out a wheezing laugh.

“Look a little closer, lassie, and think of the sea. This ol’ seadog ain’t goin’ nowhere today.”

In front of her? Kutone rubbed her eyes free of rain, blinked, then focused harder. Behind her, the waves rippled with the rush of rain, and sand shifted around her in unison with the pelting raindrops. As she concentrated harder on the sound of the sea, she made out the faint outline of an older man, tanned features carved by the wind and tempest of the sea.

“The Old Mariner,” Kutone whispered, wiping her hair away again.

“That I be,” he replied, tipping his worn hat. “Ye look like ye be seein’ magic for the first time.”

“Magic, I’ve seen from the wizard,” Kutone chuckled. “But this is my first time seeing and talking to a ghost.”

“One o’ life’s wonders ain’t nobody clued into no more, is all.” The Mariner stood straight, and gazed pointedly, as though staring through Kutone. “Lass,” he started, “I come here only when the rains do, ’cos a certain someone I be waiting for, don’t come here ‘less it rains.”

He sounded so serious, she couldn’t joke about lost lovers. “Who are you waiting for?” she rephrased, the question sounding like something she needed to ask herself.

“That I can’t say.” The Mariner grinned. “I nigh on forgotten. But lookin’ at you, lassie, I get an inkl’ of a remembrance. Ye’ve got the same stars in ye eyes as I had when I were a lovestruck lad.

“The only d’ffrence, I’m afraid, is ye be tryin’ to kill those stars, like ye pullin’ ‘em down from the sky an’ drownin’ them wit ye own hands.”

Kutone’s voice caught in her throat, totally thrown by the Mariner’s speculation. She pressed a hand to her chest as she pursed her lips together and contemplated the ache. “I’ve got old feelings I still need to get rid of,” she replied, the rain nearly drowning her out. “I can’t move forward until I get rid of my baggage.”

“Ye’ve got a Void deep in that golden heart o’ yours, lassie. Ain’t no airin’ that out on ye onesy.”

“What,” Kutone scoffed, “so I drag Sebastian down with me because I’m still hung up on a man from my past? Because I’m still the same shitty woman who just takes without offering anything of
myself in return? I can’t do that to him.”

“’Less the boy asks for a part in ye life.”

“As if.” For many reasons, at that. He knew about Rhei. He knew about her humiliation. He’d seen her drunk habits and gotten into a spat for defending her. While Kutone would never say she was completely broken, she knew she was a mess of a human being—positive and excitable one moment, maudlin and distant the next. Joining in community get-togethers one day, closing herself away the next. Who would want to deal with her constantly changing moods? Sebastian had more than enough to deal with at home, and with his future.

Ah, his future. She pressed her hand to her eyes. “He’s got plans to leave the valley, anyway. I’m not holding him back.”

The Mariner was silent for a long while, so much that Kutone figured he’d disappeared, until he pulled the brim of his hat over his eyes. “Lass,” he started, his tone severe, “focus that little shining heart o’ yours on ye for a wee moment. What’s it that ye want, eh?”

What I want? The Mariner seemed to speak directly into the emptiness, and the dying smoke at the bottom responded. To be clear, free of these shadowed memories that kept haunting her every step. To be able to reach out to someone she wanted to call a genuine friend, and not fear a backstab later on. To focus only on her new life, her new job, and the sense that as the fruits flowered and burgeoned across the fields, she too came alive. To love someone, and know she could turn around and they’d be there holding her hand, no matter the beatdown they took. To look up at the sky and fill herself with the valley’s spirit, to not cry anymore, to smile for real from the bottom of her heart—“I don’t,” she started, voice hitching, “I don’t want to feel so empty anymore. I want to be happy!”

“Aye,” the Mariner replied, “ain’t that the purest wish out there, eh?”

“Kutone?”

Sebastian.

She hurriedly scrubbed her tears away, just as the ghost of the Mariner dissipated like mist. For a long while, she stared at the spot the old seadog stood before, wondering again about who he waited for even in death. Then, turning around, she met eyes with Sebastian, Oki’s loose leash in his hands. He sheepishly dropped it, as the retriever bounded to meet his master. “Your dog was fussing over there,” he said, pointing behind him, “so I thought something had happened to you.”

Rain water soaked him through his sweatshirt, and dripped rivulets through his hair. While he didn’t seem to mind the wet, he breathed heavily, like he’d just sprinted an entire marathon and then some more. “I heard you talking,” he went on, his face rosy. “Thought I’d leave you alone, but then I heard you—”

“I’m fine.” She wasn’t about to ask how much he’d heard. For all Kutone knew, he might have been standing there for her entire conversation with the Mariner, and likely unable to see the ghost himself, must have wondered at her grasp on reality. Either way, whatever Sebastian thought didn’t matter to her anymore, because now, she realized—the more her feelings knocked on the door to her conscience, talking to Sebastian hurt even more, because the more she waffled with Rhei, and her own self for that matter, the more Sebastian became collateral. The next time he offered his comfort, she’d splinter and break. “I’m fine,” she said again. “Sorry to worry you.”

They stood together there on the sand, rain soaking them through as they each stewed in their own thoughts. Sebastian broke the silence first. “Hey.”
Kutone lifted her face.

The slightest of smiles lit his features, as he turned back to cross the bridge. “This way. The view’s better—I told you, remember?”

“I remember.” From the first time they’d talked, when she came out of the mines and found him smoking by the lake. “Out by Lonely Rock, you said.”

He waited until Kutone, with a becalmed Oki behind her, reached his side before continuing along the beach. He matched her pace, but said nothing, allowing the rain, already somewhat easing, to speak for them, until Kutone opened her mouth. “I’m sorry,” she started, “I didn’t mean to be a nuisance last night.”

“I figured you heard us at some point,” Sebastian replied with a sigh. “That was just Demetrius being Demetrius.”

“Does he get on you like that a lot?”

“All the time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

The crash and pull of the waves accompanied the crunch of their saturated shoes through wet sand. She ached even harder. “You’re not unwanted,” she murmured, voice shaking. “For what it’s worth, I want you.”

“So you heard that part, huh?” He sounded irate, but embarrassed. Like he wanted to go back to the night before and shut himself up. He waited for a nod from Kutone, and sighed again. “Demetrius wasn’t entirely wrong, either. I get that.”

Sebastian stopped suddenly, allowing Kutone ahead a few steps before he spoke again. “I’m sorry you had to hear me being, well… me.”

“You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

He closed the distance between them, coming close enough to inconspicuously grab her hand if he wanted. And he did, gingerly weaving his fingers between hers. “Because it is. I sounded like the moody teenager Demetrius still thinks I am—!”

“But you’re not,” said Kutone. She curled her fingers tight, her fingertips pressed against Sebastian’s knuckles, as the rain trickled through the space between their palms. “You’re a person with feelings and thoughts, emotions and reactions, and you brought all of that to the surface. For my sake.”

Another moment passed. She breathed once, deep. “Thank you.”

They started along the beach again, at a slow walk. Sodden Oki wandered away from the pair, inspected the remains of some washed-up debris, and meandered back before stopping and wagging his tail.

At this, Sebastian chuckled. “You know,” he started, watching Oki wander off again. “What you said before. You want—well—I’m not unwanted. It’s worth a lot. Don’t sell yourself short.”

Affection welled up to an ache in her chest, but in the next instant she recognized Sebastian’s voice
at her ear, that same ache churned into panic. A hint of terror next, and then, finally died down to nervousness. “Hey,” she started, “Sebastian—!” We shouldn’t do this—I still have Rhei on my mind—I need to tell you what I did to him—

“I got worried. I came up to see how you were doing and you weren’t there.” He guided her down the westernmost pier, and stopped once they stood close to the edge. “And you weren’t at the Banks. Ran across town and back looking for you.”

“I was going to stop by later.”

“Couldn’t wait.”

He held her hand tight, as he kept his eyes on the distant horizon. Dark clouds signaling further rain hovered ominously, but Sebastian regarded them with a content expression. “At least the rain kept everyone away,” he started. “Only needed to deal with myself.”

She thought about apologizing again, but the entirety of her attention went to Sebastian’s hand in hers. He wasn’t going to let go for any reason, not that she wanted him to, either. A dizzying flare rose in her stomach again—am i alive?—and the rain lightened.

Sebastian cast a concerned expression to the sky. “Guess it won’t go on, huh?”

“All good things must come to an end,” Kutone murmured back, earning a squeeze of her hand.

“I—I’d usually agree.” He met her gaze with his own incredulous look. “But with you, I don’t believe that.”

Despite the confusion in his voice, Sebastian went on. “This—this is new to me,” he said. “People are really just… temporary statements, you know? Yet they suffocate me—pressure really gets to me. People make me anxious, Kutone. I can’t stand them.

“But with everyone rained out, and us, like this, I—I breathe so easy.”

At that exact moment, as Sebastian, dark hair failing to hide the reddening tips of his ears, turned toward the clouded horizon, Kutone suddenly and painfully understood the emotion behind Rhei’s words back when they first met. I wish I could kiss you. She almost blurted the words herself, but remembering the consequences of those words, she bit her lip, choked the words down, and stared at their clasped hands instead. An ache even harder than before rolled inside her chest, as she considered Sebastian’s height over her, his rain-flecked hair, his single piercing, his sodden sweatshirt clinging to the contours of his shoulders and arms, his voice forming the shape of her name, and the ache flipped over, fell through the ceiling of her chest, dropped far and banged on the sides of the hollow, and bared itself to the clarity of her thoughts, finally given the words:

I like him.

Did he feel the same about her? He did, didn’t he, else he would have let go of her hand a long time ago, yet he hadn’t even loosened his grip.

A light breeze parted the clouds above. Sunlight faintly glowed through them, casting playful auras along the beach.

“Did you sleep okay?”

I really like him.
“Yeah.” She couldn’t mask the squeak in her voice.

“You looked like you were.”

“You were watching?”

“It calmed me down, after what happened. It got me thinking me too.”

“About?”

“Certain things.”

She decided not to press further, and leaned her head against his shoulder. His scent filled her. Fresh linen, she thought, with the undertone of spent cigarettes, soaked with rainwater and the sea breeze.

*I really, really like him.*

She didn’t want to detach herself from him, ever, if possible. “Sebastian,” she softly started, “I promise I’ll pull myself together.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’m realizing something right now, you know? Something so nice I’ll probably cry about it later, but I have to pull myself together before I can tell you.”

“That’s fine.”

“Don’t wait for me.”

“I think I will anyway.”

“Don’t.”

“I will. That way, when you’re ready, you know where to find me.”

Chapter End Notes

She got it! She finally got it! Right?

Not right, because there’s still more to come.

Thank you, as always, for all of your kind comments and anticipation! Please, feel free to leave more of those comments and kudos and bookmarks, or you can even head over to my [tumblr](http://tumblr.com) to leave me questions or submissions for writing requests!

Your feedback will help me get over this hangover—I mean...
on the day a boy and a girl held hands on the pier, the rainy sea remembered an old story:

song slid out of the cresting tide, in glorious silver notes on the evening of a gentle sheet of rain. a boy once heard stories of syrens, and determined to prove them as benevolent songstresses, rather than the fatal allure the town’s sailors and his own father warned him against. never follow those songs, boy, they said, lest ye be wantin’ to join the other fools drownin’ in perfumed dreams. with voices as melancholic as the ocean breeze, and rippling like a lullaby over bells, the merfolk, the boy reasoned, must have had a reason for visiting the town so often.

they be here to take the unsuspectin’ sailor, said the rumors.

no, the boy said, they here to put the town to sleep, when the storms be about to rip the fishin’ boats and trade schooners off the docks. and when the waves scared the babes in their cribs, that there silver song drowns out the dark crash and pull, and repaints our dreams into watercolor drawings of the sea.

he left the town at 16 to find the silver song. upon his favorite sailboat that caught the ocean breeze from any direction he pulled the tiller, he set out, following the tide’s silver foam as it led him toward the moonlight. he continued his journey only at night, using daylight for fishing and foraging, and for docking in seaside caves and shaded coral reefs whenever the sun winked at him over the horizon. a suitor of the night, he called himself, an explorer looking for the voice that sang him to sleep in his childhood, the same voice the men feared on many a stormy evening.

sometimes, as his boat skipped over the cresting currents, the silver song greeted him from the depths of the sea. and every time the notes bubbled to the surface, he lashed hard on the tiller and yanked up his sails, slowing his journey to a stop, just to listen to the song of the deep. then, he apologized to the folk down below, and gently lowered anchor as he nestled himself in the bow of the boat, and listened to the concert. as though they joyfully welcomed their audience, the voices swelled from concert to symphony, and the boy watched stars fall from the sky to join those beautiful voices.

he was 19 when the storm struck him, threw him off his boat and slapped him into the depths. despite all the love he’d given to it, the ungrateful sea lashed its waters over him, burying him deeper and deeper under the currents until his limbs went numb, his breath hammered against his ribs, and his sight clouded by inky sea.

then a bolt of silver streaked through the black, and song surrounded him, caressed his hands, touched his cheek, and he dared himself to open his eyes.

silver hair spread like an unfurled dress, she shot through the deep like white ink spilled over black paper. she glowed silver, her skin royal and iridescent like the scales on her fish-tail from her waist down, and she sang admonishment and love to the black over them. webbed hands gestured to the ocean, as she danced in the undercurrent, and then—then the moon burst through the black, and the inky world separated into royal blue, and the ocean folded under her will.

her song faded. she turned and with one powerful kick, shot back to the boy. she touched his cheek as gently as their sliminess allowed, and her eyes, deep black and nearly unseeing like the threatening ocean, stared in curious wonder, as his last breath lurched out of him, and he fell asleep once again.
a firm grip on his arm, a rushing torrent of sea through his hair, a pressure wrapping around his swimming head and compressed chest—then the open air of the night, and the comforting rigidity of the boat. he coughed the threatening sea out of his lungs, sputtered it out of his nose, slammed it out of both ears, and crawled to the edge with bleary eyes.

she was still there, silver hair curtained over her fishy, dark eyes and mouthless face, and gill-like slits along her neck. but as soon as he opened his mouth to give thanks, she slid back into the depths like silver ink down a drain. she did not sing for the rest of the evening.

she did not sing for nigh on two weeks.

he was lost for that time, drifting along the sea without his guiding voice. his wandering, aimless. the sky, empty.

she did not sing for nigh on three years.

he thought about turning over his sailboat in the water, and sinking to the depths one more time, just to hear her voice again. even if she simply let the ocean devour him, he hoped she’d sing for him just one more time.

he was 24 when he drifted into a valley, and realized he was in love with a monster.

but the valley, where stars left behind dew drops on the leaves, had its own tales of ocean song and the folk who sang them. he beached his boat high above the tide line, and sat with the townspeople around their fires and listened to their praising stories of the sea’s maidens. here, the people knew the true forms of the lullabies, and gathered nightly to listen to the songs.

but she was not among them, her silver voice.

he lived along the line of shoals while he waited for the evening songs, for nigh on two years. the songs rang empty, hollow, every single night.

then one day, he pushed his boat off the valley’s shores, and lashed his tiller one more time, to find her once again. along the way, he stopped at port towns and their taverns, and fixed the stories of his childhood, filled the new sailors and old-timers with his nights on the sea, and the ocean kingdoms he dreamed of when the silver song bubbled up from the depths.

they called him, at first, the crazy mariner who fell in love with monsters, but he persisted. even if he never touched on that silver maiden, he spoke of the sea and its falling stars, the tempestuous ocean that angrily flung him overboard and the forgiveness of its receding tide. he spoke of otherworldly colors on the horizon, and sailing toward them until he saw the next uninhabited island. he spoke of foam and brine and salt like he spoke of brothers, sisters, and cousins, and the people who heard him speak, changed their opinions.

he spoke of love to the deepest degree.

he was 38, sailboat creaking underneath him, when he washed up one evening on home. quiet, save for the lapping tide against the piers, and no one noticed him as he tied the old boat fast. the tavern hardly recognized him, carved up by sea breeze and brine, toasted by ocean sunlight, but they heard him speak of the silver maiden, and they knew—welcome back, boy. and they listened with rapture, as he told them about her guiding voice, her liquid form that became a bullet in black water. they raised their ales and meads and beers to his safe return and 20-year story, and they laughed together like their old pops and grandads used to laugh, and then they asked,

you gonna set sail again?
he stared at the golden mead swirling in his tankard, and thought hard about his next step. gold, he thought, just ain’t the color. ain’t nothin’ gold out there on the sea, just dark and moonlight and silver and blue. sometimes, the ocean blended all those colors into one perfect form, undeniably monstrous in its mystery and allure, but perfect all the same.

i have to. a man o’ the sea can’t stay on no land for long.

they wanted him back to help the young ‘uns learn the sailboat, like he and they had when they were boys. and with his long years on his, he’d be the perfect teacher to get the boys and girls ready for their turns on the sea.

another time, he promised, and a blessed rejection it was, because as he left the tavern in a golden haze, a silver note lifted from the sea. the mead lost its grip on him—he bolted to his tied ship, heart beating like it did twenty-two years ago when he snuck his boat out onto the waves. one note became a hum, and the hum became a melody, the melody, a lullaby.

he was a scruffy old man, but his spirit leaped for his ocean-beaten body. he followed the hesitant silver voice back onto the waves, and lashed his tiller in the direction of the sound.

and then the sound became words: please revel only in the beauty of my voice, my love, cast your eyes away from the monster the sea has made me, and should your love be true as mine, follow me to the place where, in your eye, i may become divine.

she pulled the sea behind her and left trails of silver in the water, a path for the boat to follow as he kept his hand firm on the tiller. for the first time in his life, he truly needed no food or drink to keep his eyes on the trail, and ears on her voice. her song continued, neverending, as she guided him between the currents, over rolling hills and through the deep trenches of the waves, through the coral labyrinths and curtains of rainy storm. when she hesitated, wondering to allow him rest, he shook his head and called to her,

i’m still here.

and she allowed the moonlight to caress her silver scales as her acknowledgment, and sang once more.

then, as familiar shoals and the greenery of the valley appeared again over the horizon, her song faded with her last notes: at full moon and fleeting rain i shall become divine, no longer the monster tempting you into the prison of the sea—wait for me here until that time, my love, and you will see me, the way i wish i could be.

so he dragged his old sailboat up above the tideline and lodged chunks of rock and coral underneath. daytime hung high in the sky, so he retreated underneath the shade of trees, and waited.

daylight became twilight, and twilight to midnight, and though the full moon hung in the sky, there was no rain.

he waited.

he waited a full month, skimming the nearby reef for food, and following the path north for water, but he always returned in time for the silver song at night. the people of the valley joined him at times for the ocean’s concert, but left him by midnight to enjoy the melody on his own.

then, the next full moon came, and with it, a sheet of rain. he groomed himself in preparation, his boyhood heart leaping again as the rain pattered on the brim of his hat. should he take the boat out to meet her? should he dive into the water? he rubbed his chin, devoid of stubble, and became all too
aware of the distance between the boy of his soul, and the stiffness of his body.

moonlight shone on the sea’s surface as her silver song rippled across the beach. here, she sang, stardew trickles through the leaves and into the rivers, and finally into the ocean so that the purest wishes can come true. a splash from the ocean, she shot up like a tidal wave, and landed on the beach in a silver, fishy heap. she untangled her iridescent tail from her silver hair, spread the fins on her elbows into fans, and flailed languidly on the sand. against her chest, she held a long, blue, spiraled shell in her webbed hand.

her mouthless voice quivered wetly: please cast your eyes away from me. wait for the amulet and the stardew and the moonlight, and i shall be divine.

he wished he could speak in song back to her, but all he had was his seadog tone: ye be divine just the way the sea made ye.

she narrowed her dark eyes in mirth.

then, the shell hidden in her hand glowed as moonlight struck its wet surface, and she glowed silver until he could no longer watch her without shielding his eyes. like one of the stars he’d seen fall into the ocean, she glimmered, and then—

she was a naked woman before him, silvery curls drenched in rain. shell still in hand, she touched her human skin, devoid of silver scales, touched her lips, pursed them together, and she touched her smooth neck, and she breathed deeply through her nose. she noticed her feet for the first time, and the atrophy of her legs, and she fell back onto the sand.

he stumbled and tripped on his way to her, but made it to her side as she turned her dark, seeing eyes to his.

have i become divine in your eye?

and as he embraced her, silver maiden of the sea, she embraced him back, and left a wet kiss on his cheek. he caressed her hair, her cheek, and relished the pressure of her soft body against him, and said back to her,

ye be divine the way the sea made ye, the way the moon and stardew fashioned ye.

and she smiled with her new lips and blinking eyes, and she kissed him again as the rain masked her tears. she pressed the blue shell into his hands. for safekeeping, she said, for this moment shall not last forever.

he cradled her in his arms and took her closer to the tideline. he draped her in his coat and dipped her feet in the water, and she breathed easy against him. they exchanged no words, replaced by the cold of her body against the warmth of his.

for hours, they said nothing, languishing on the beach together as the tide came higher and higher, until finally, the rain lightened, and the skies cleared.

the moment ended. she breathed laboriously, and grabbed at his shirt with clammy, webbed hands. her silver curls thinned to wisps, and her skin shone silver, then scaly, and her legs flailed in the water, as her long, iridescent tail splashed into view. he begged her back into the sea, where she belonged, where she could breathe, but she stared with her dark, unseeing eyes, and in her wet, mouthless voice, cried,

will you wait here for me?
and he grazed his fingers down her smooth face.

so long as the sea stays here, i wait.

her dark eyes welling with tears, she slithered back into the ocean. her silver song filled his ears, his heart, and though the tide pulled at his body, he grasped her shell close and let the sea tug at him, until the next morning when her song faded into the sunlight.

he was 60 years old and had never told the story, but the valley called him the Old Mariner who fell in love with the sea, and he never denied it.

he was 68 years old when the silver song filled him again, and she appeared at the far depths of the tide, beckoning him to follow. he clutched the shell, now a pendant around his neck, and sat at the edge of the tide.

he waited.

the tide came to him.

he fell asleep.

and deep in his sleep, his divine silver maiden embraced him again, this time, forever.

Chapter End Notes

Another interlude chapter, another one that I've been excited to upload since I first started drafting this fic. This chapter is one of a few major reasons why A Drop Echoes even exists.

I will still be uploading this Friday as usual. I just had a feeling you guys would want a little bit of a downer before things. Pick. Up.
**Warning:** the starring characters in this chapter appear to have some unresolved sexual tension going on, and one does make **unwanted advances** on the other. While the advance itself is short and not overtly sexual, I understand I may have some readers that appreciate the warning. Take care of yourself, and don't force yourself to read something that might distress you too much.

You can chat with me, send me writing requests, gush at me, ask me questions, everything, at my [tumblr](https://example.tumblr.com).

Rhei A. Young: starling businessman, chief merchandise executive at Joja Co. HQ, Zuzu City Branch. While his records detailed him as contagiously passionate, he actually, seriously, hated his job, and hated himself to a deeper degree. His regard for the company’s high-rise offices had plummeted at the same time as his secretary, and with her, his faith in himself as a decent human being. Closing transactions still posed no trouble for him, but lately, he finished his deals with a new despondency he struggled to hide.

Things had ended so suddenly, after all.

But then, at an early summer conference, he’d overheard the chief event coordinator chatting with her ladies. Successful, working moms, the entire group of them, the type that reminisced about their younger sizes in pencil skirts, then compared their children’s accomplishments within the same breath. While Rhei had learned to tune out general gossip, that chief coordinator’s words, when asked about her daughter, nearly made him choke on his hors d’oeuvres.

“Oh, Kutone's doing work out in the countryside now!”

Really?

Well, yes, really. It made sense. He’d heard, after all—and it had hurt him like a pistol whip to the face—about Kutone’s sudden resignation. And the whispers had flared anew around the building—*maybe it was the scandal*, they said. *Maybe she was too proud of what she had before. Serves her right.*

“She’s taken on the responsibility I should have when my father passed away—I’m very proud of the restoration she’s doing.”

Seriously? She was that close this entire time? Could this mean…?

“No, no, she never told me the details, but apparently she had to take a serious demotion at her last job. After all that work she put in, too! Maybe I should have sued…”

A second chance, Rhei thought. Hope gripped his chest so hard he thought he’d rip apart on the spot. Without the tight rein he kept on his emotions, he knew he would burst into tears.

For the first time in a long while, he’d turned up his charm, as he approached the ladies. Though
prudence screamed at him to keep his mouth shut, to just let this go already, the honesty he’d learned from Kutone took its stand. He quickly had that chief coordinator, Nagisa, whose feathered pixie cut still mirrored the deep violet of her daughter’s hair, blushing and babbling across the frames of her wired glasses.

Kutone. Stardew Valley. Restoring a plot of land left behind by Nagisa’s father. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Young,” said Nagisa, hands gently clasped. “I did try to stop her at first, but she seems to really like it out there. If my childhood home fills her with that much joy, I can’t possibly take her away from it anymore.”

“No,” said Rhei, “I understand. I’d want her to be happy too. It was just—she left so suddenly. I didn’t have a chance to say goodbye.”

Understanding clicked between the ladies as they beheld Rhei’s crestfallen expression, but it was Nagisa that stopped them from voicing it. “Kutone’s not on the grid anymore,” she said. After adjusting her glasses back up the bridge of her nose, she smiled, softly. “I can forward you her mailing address, if you’d like to get in touch with her.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“I’m only laying down a flimsy bridge, Mr. Young. How you cross it, and how you handle Kutone is, frankly, none of my business.” She produced her phone from an inner pocket of her blazer, as she dropped her voice to a whisper. “But I can’t bear to see you, fabled for your success and charisma, so hideously lovesick. At the risk of losing my daughter’s trust, I’ll do this for you. So, sort yourself out, will you?”

But even with Nagisa’s support, Kutone hadn’t responded. While Rhei had managed to send three letters to Kutone’s Stardew Valley address, he never received acknowledgment. For too many nights since his first letter at the end of summer, he’d closely watched his phone, waiting for Kutone’s name to show up on the screen. He’d even ignored calls and texts from company acquaintances, as he sat up in bed with whiskey in hand, praying for the moment she’d open her door for him.

She never did.

He didn’t blame her, of course. But each agonizing day, as summer cooled into fall, without word from her had rendered him uncharacteristically anxious on his bus ride heading out into Stardew Valley. Attache case cradled against him, and fingers absently massaging the scar above the corner of his eye, he tried thinking of possible greetings to start their conversation, without it ending in another brutal slap.

Kutone, long time no see—how’ve you been? …Too casual.

Kutone, there you are! You never responded so I was worried about you! …Too insensitive.

Kutone, we’ll take care of the elephant in the room first. I’m sorry. …Straight to the point. That might work.

But if she had friends nearby? Or…

Or a significant other?

Rhei tried to imagine otherwise, tried to halt the panic that drenched him in icy hot sweat. He reached into the pocket of his suit jacket, and clenched his hand around the two things he carried as
remembrance of Kutone. The pattered serration of a key dug into his palm. His fingertips traced the circumference of a ring. Their metal surfaces had warmed during their long stays in his pocket, but they soothed him. With a breath, he gathered his thoughts again.

Never, he’d never blame her. Yet, he couldn’t afford to be stupid, either. Kutone would find someone else. Someone completely different from him in manner and talk and style. Someone who proved, someway, somehow, they’d never walk away from her, unlike himself.

That’s why, back then, she’d demanded her key back, but he hadn’t been able to give it up.

*Then I’ll change the lock. Good night, Mr. Young.*

Then he was alone in his high-rise office, bleeding down the side of his face from the corner of a heavy phone case. He should have chased her down the building. He should have pulled her into his arms and said he’d take the fall with her.

But he didn’t.

Would the key be a good segue into conversation? When he faced her again and wrapped his head around her new life, would he be able to finally give her back the key? Or could he, maybe, unlock the spark they’d shared together, and revive it into something better, newer than what they had before?

Would he then be able to give her the ring? Could he promise himself to her with it? Would she accept it?

Apologetic then propose. He’d never been more certain of his purpose.

Friday afternoon in the crisp air and falling autumn foliage of Stardew Valley took Rhei back to his drives out of the city, Kutone at his side. They’d toured wineries and vineyards together, talking business and production with the vintners—Rhei with his usual charm, Kutone with her unflappable coolness—as they tasted and commented back and forth on their drinks. Much like those days, reds and oranges drifted by as Rhei followed the path away from the bus stop. To the west, he noted signs pointing to a Breezy Banks Farm, and to the east, Pelican Town. Nostalgia wanted to drag him toward the farm, to see the fields and goods it had to offer, but his job called him east. Morris had already called an ungodly number of times, wondering about Rhei’s ETA, about the nature of the review, about…

Rhei slung his case over his shoulder and loosened the top button of his shirt. To hell with all this, he thought, ignoring the ogling stares of the townspeople at the general store. He swore the shopkeep glared daggers through his glasses, but kept walking past. According to the map on his phone, Pelican Town’s Joja Mart was just across the bridge…

…There. A blue eyesore standing out like a bruise against the golden autumn. He sighed, pocketed his phone, and approached the mart.

To Rhei’s surprise, Morris, already sweating, burst through the doors and, sporting the shit-eating Joja Sneer—coinage by Kutone—skidded to a halt at Rhei’s side. “Mr. Young!” Morris, Rhei noted, advertised himself too strongly, a possible deterrent for would-be customers. “Mr. Young, we’ve been excited for your arrival, sir! You never responded to my inquiries regarding this review today—busy at the office, sir, yes?”

“You could say that,” Rhei replied, brushing past Morris. “Corporate’s been wondering about you
and that community development program, you know.”

The beads of sweat on Morris’s forehead dripped into the frames of glasses. “Ah, yes, the development program,” he replied, “the one in tandem with the membership program, yes? It’s been—it’s been—well—it gained some ground.”

“Oh? Good to hear.” Inside the store, Rhei heaved another sigh. So much stuff, he thought, so much crap stuff at such stupidly high prices in comparison to its production value—a part of him was glad Kutone had left the scene. After her demotion, he’d stopped trying to court the quality goods. To hell with the “sell good stuff under a ubiquitous name” pipe dream he once spouted to her—corporate wanted nothing more, he found out, than to buy the brands he brought into the company’s repertoire, water them down to a cheaper production value, and sell, sell, sell.

He waved a greeting to the young woman at the cash register, who turned her exhausted features into a slight smile and nodded back. Gods, she looked miserable. “Morris, what would you say about your employees’ satisfaction here?”

Even the young woman showed a flicker of surprise, as Morris stammered back, “Employee satisfaction? Well, ah, that’s—I—that’s part of the review?”

Rhei turned to the dumbfounded manager and raised his brow. “Of course it’s part of the review. You manage this place.” He noted the young woman inconspicuously shaking her head.

He waved away Morris’s attempts at explanation, as he next perused the aisles, stocked, but, “Disorderly. You follow the display guidelines we send you?”

Morris blubbered some incoherent answer, with the only intelligible word from his mouth, “Shane.”

Apparently the only full-time stocker there. Due to the others’ long commutes into the valley, Morris, out of what he called “consideration,” gave them only part-time hours. Rhei sighed again. “You have a surplus of hours, Morris.” He waved aside the babbling excuses about driving down wasteful spending, and continued on, where he found the worker in question rushing product out of the box and onto the shelves.

Shane never lifted his face, hidden beneath the brim of his company-issued Joja cap. Whether to pass the time as quickly as possible, or to ignore Rhei’s presence, Rhei couldn’t tell, but he noted the stiffness in Shane’s jaw, the perpetual shadow on his chin, and his robotic movements from box to shelf, box to shelf.

Disregarding Morris again explaining his theory about efficiency in relation to productivity, Rhei crouched low, meeting Shane’s eye level. “Hey,” he said, earning a surprised jump and cacophonous clatter of cans. “Sorry…”

At first, Shane shot an incendiary glare, but upon noticing Rhei’s suit and attache case, lowered his face again. “Tell me about it,” he grumbled, scooping up cans from the floor.

Morris shot into the scene, mouth running like a motor again. Have you any idea who you’re talking to, Shane?! Have some respect, this is a top-tier executive from corporate, and he was generous enough to stop by our little store to conduct our review—so consider what you say—

“Morris,” Rhei cut in, massaging his temple, “let me talk to him one-on-one, would you?”

Initially hesitant, Morris soon tucked tail and slunk away.

Shane snorted, his tone dry. “Even corporate can’t stand him, huh?”
“I can’t stand him. How you all deal with him on a daily basis, I’ll never understand.” Rhei offered his hand, and helped Shane to his feet. “Call me Rhei,” he said, giving Shane’s hand a firm shake. “How is it, being the only full-timer here?”

Shane cast a forlorn glance between Rhei and the shelves. “Is this the type of interview where you ask me to be honest, and you write it up in your reports or something and send it off to the top?”

Rhei shrugged, but gestured Shane to continue.

“It’s fucking miserable.”

Rhei didn’t even try to hide his bemused smile.

Shane dug his hands into the pockets of his jacket, as he regarded Rhei’s expression with slight amazement. “Joja screwed you over too?”

“In a way,” Rhei replied, “but I was also part of the problem.” He left a pat on Shane’s shoulder. “Thanks for your honesty, Shane. And, for what it’s worth, thank you for your hard work.”

“Gratitude from Joja? I think I can die a little happier.”

He’d stopped considering himself Joja a couple years ago. Leaving Shane to continue shelving, and grateful for the Morris-less quiet, Rhei continued toward the back of the mart. There, jamming out with earbuds not even remotely hidden, was Sam, according to the tag on his jacket. He swished his mop back and forth in time to the rhythm of his music, and with his eyes closed, was completely oblivious to Rhei’s presence, until Rhei tapped Sam on the shoulder and indicated his ears. “Morris lets you do that?”

Sam, cornered, tried to grin. “Technically, no.” He stuffed his earbuds into his pockets and stood rigid, tensing even more when he registered Rhei’s appearance. “Right,” Sam gulped, “today’s the review, isn’t it?”

“Right.”

“Shit—I mean—you won’t tell Morris about this, will you? I’m saving up for a synthesizer for the band, so I really need this job—!”

“You’re in a band?” The guy needed to calm down. Then again, Rhei thought with a grimace, “professional appearance” was just another term for “intimidation.” Amazingly, he’d once made the suit part of his appeal, but lately, his heart didn’t fit right in the sleeves, the suit no longer part of him. Losing the tie hadn’t helped, and apparently, unbuttoning the collar did nothing either. He had to rely on talk, just like the other executives he worked with.

Luckily, Sam practically glowed at the mention of his band. “My friends and I just started one!” he said. “I’m leading on guitar, Abby’s on drums, and Seb’s on keyboard. We’re still deciding on a name, but we got another friend to help us decide on our genre—oh but, maybe it’s not something you’d know. Sir.”

“Try me.”

“Electronica, a little bit of dance?”

Already, he could hear the beats in his head, the same rhythm and melody from the day he’d met Kutone. “Sure takes me back,” Rhei replied, crossing his arms. “That’s a staple of the clubbing scene.”
Sam, aghast, gaped at Rhei with wide eyes and open mouth. “No way,” he breathed, “you’re actually keeping up with our generation?”

“That’s rude of you. I’m only thirty-two.”

“Old enough!” Sam grinned. “But you’ve got great taste in music, that’s for sure. Can’t believe I was worried about some frumpy old dude coming in for the review.”

“You almost had that, but I volunteered to do this one.”

Sam laughed. “Well thank you for that, Sir! ‘Cause of you showing up, now I know Kutone was spot on with her suggestion!”

Kuto…? Sweat slicked his palm around the handle of his attache case, as Rhei stared at a bewildered Sam. “…Kutone?”

“Yeah, Kutone. Just moved in this spring onto the old farm up the road. Everyone in town’s pretty chill with her, even Shane—and he never makes friends.”

His own pulse deafened him. Even more than apologies or apartment keys, this scenario—I met one of your friends today—had to be the best segue into a conversation with Kutone. Rhei grabbed at it with every ounce of his soul, job forgotten. “Could you tell me,” he tried, voice tremulous from restraint, “where I can find her?”

“Like I said, the old farm up the road. The Banks?”

Breezy Banks—he remembered seeing it coming down from the bus stop. Pivoting on his heel, he marched away, until Sam called him back.

“Hey, uh, Sir? There’s no telling where she’s off to during the day, y’know!” Sam waited until Rhei turned around. “But today’s Friday—I think she’ll stop by the Saloon tonight to hang out with us.”

Rhei breathed, collecting himself. “The Saloon?”

Sam nodded, still astonished at Rhei’s sudden change in demeanor. “It’s kind of a town tradition—we all head to the Stardrop Saloon on Friday nights. Sebastian hands me my ass at pool every single week, Abigail hangs out, and all the other folk drink and dance and just have a nice get-together. Kutone’s been joining us lately.”

Stardrop Saloon, in the evening. Rhei had imagined himself seeing Kutone at the Fair, but a desperate, starving need to see her overtook his rationality. He smiled, gratefully. “Thanks, Sam,” he said. “Thanks for everything.”

He checked his watch again and again, as the afternoon ticked slowly into evening. Any time now, he told himself with deep breaths. The bartender and his assistant kept his whiskey topped, but he forced himself to a slow pace, pounding his drinks down whenever anxiety made his hands tremble. Maybe the drink made his palpitations worse, but it also momentarily got his thoughts in order. His mind went back to devising possible first words.

Kutone—he knew he’d lead off with her name first—we need to—no—I need to talk to you.

There, simple, to the point, without sounding insensitive. But maybe the words were too heavy—she could easily turn around and walk out as soon as she saw him. Should he grab her? No, not in the
middle of so many watching eyes; that would just be a repeat of their fallout at the company building.

He asked about a private table. The bartender nodded, informing Rhei of one available in the back, should it be necessary. Rhei took it right away, adding he was waiting for a friend. Every time the door opened and a valley resident walked in, he checked for violet hair, for caramel skin, for that aloof pout of her lip he remembered kissing so often.

He’d unwisely slammed down his fifth drink, and blinked back the wave of dazedness, when the door opened again. Sam, free of his Joja outfit, walked in, followed by a smaller, fair girl with purple hair—violet, Rhei corrected, it has to be violet, and the skin sun-kissed caramel. Next, a young man, dark-haired, dark clothes, yet with an inimitably tender expression, held the door open, for a young woman.

A young woman with deep violet hair in long twin tails, too-long bangs framing her caramel features. A young woman who rolled up the sleeves of her baggy flannel shirt, and owned the country look even when she lived in the city. She smiled beautifully, winsomely, at the young man next to her, as she stepped inside. He stepped in after her, and bashfully moved to stand closer to her.

Rhei shot up from his seat then, scrambling out from the barstand with a clatter.

While the rest of the patrons glanced once and then went back to minding their own food and drink, Kutone’s color drained from her features the moment she laid eyes on Rhei. Her friend followed her gaze, and leaned slightly back. Thank goodness.

She whispered something to him, he replied with concern, she shook her head, and then, he hesitantly walked away, following Sam and the other girl to the far end of the saloon. After watching him leave, wan Kutone stepped toward Rhei. She had purpose in her step, and he brought himself to his full height as she approached.

“You took the private table?” she muttered, walking past him. If she registered his slight nod, she didn’t show it, and wordlessly sauntered down the corridor to the left of the barstand. Around another corner, and through the first door, she finally led him into the saloon’s private room, outfitted with a homely dining table and high window.

As Rhei closed the door behind him, Kutone made her way to the farthest end of the room, and leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “So?” Her voice was soft, cautious, and slightly hostile. “Jaci put you to this?”

He decided to keep his distance from her, keeping the entire length of the room between them as he swirled his glass of whiskey. Ice clinked gently inside. “Jaci didn’t even last a day when she tried your position,” he replied. “Then she disappeared.”

“Quit?”

Rhei shrugged, and pounded his whiskey for the sixth time. Along with the flare of too much alcohol burning in him, a dangerous wooziness blanketed his head. Scrunching his eyes shut, he shook his head to clear himself. “I don’t really care what she did afterward,” he swallowed. “She spread those crap rumors, got you demoted, was shit at your job, then just upped and disappeared. Although…” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I vaguely remember her saying something about trying to apologize to you.”

“She tried.” Muffled camaraderie echoed through the wooden walls of the saloon, but Kutone remained unaffected. She watched him with narrowed eyes. “Said the whole thing was a joke then it became true. Something like that. I told her to eat shit and get out of my face.”
“You would say that.”

“So how did you find me?”

“Your mother was the coordinator for the summer conference.”

Kutone sighed and shook her head. “Bless her. She loves Dad dearly, but a smile from you would knock her socks off.”

“But I promise, I swear to you, no one else knows you’re here.” He stared for a while at the set table before them. Clean, simple plates sat atop rustic, checkered placemats, utensils flanking them. A single unlit candle stood next to a wine bottle half-filled with water, and adorned with a single red carnation. The setting for a romantic dinner, Rhei thought, but neither he or Kutone took a step toward it.

She’d averted her eyes from him, and watched the sheen of the polished tabletop, rendering Kutone’s response absent at best. “It’s already bad enough that you’re here.”

Her words hurt. They hurt deeply, like she’d taken one of the knives off the table and dug a little pit into the back corner of his heart. He sunk to the floor. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. He pressed his fingers to the scar at the corner of his brow. “I’m sorry, Kutone. If I’d just stepped in instead of walking away like they told me to—if I’d stood by your side instead of chasing this stupid job—you wouldn’t have had to run away. You wouldn’t have the reputation you have now. And I’m so, so sorry.”

Unlike two years before, when she’d slammed her final reports and files onto his office desk, she stood silently, listening to his unsteady voice, shaking partly from the whiskey, partly from his overwhelming realization that finally, finally he had this chance to talk to her. “I left a scar,” she said, watching Rhei rub the mark. “Does it hurt still?”

Truthfully, it did, but not in the same spot. Knots tangled themselves into choking lumps in his throat, his chest, even his stomach, every time he ran his fingers over the smoothened skin of that old laceration. But he shook his head. “It’s more like a constant reminder,” he said, “to never let the job distract me from what’s most important.”

“What’s most important…” echoed Kutone, casting her eyes to the window above her. Moonlight filtered through, as well as a cool breeze, in stark contrast to the warm stuffiness inside the saloon.

As he watched the night lights cast their shadows over her features, desperation gripped him at the knot in his stomach. Rhei stood up, and gently placed his glass on the table as he approached Kutone. She froze noticeably when he stopped, close enough to kiss her. “I don’t deserve you anymore,” he murmured, cupping her face in his hands. “But damn me, Kutone…”

“Don’t,” she cautioned.

He slid one hand down, down her body to her hip. “I need you,”

She shook her head—no you don’t—but her body hummed against him as he gently pressed himself on her. He tried to shield his breath from her skin, soft and plush against the graze of his lips. “I want you.”

“Don’t—!” Her hardened voice unwound into a gasp, as Rhei pressed his lips into the crook of her neck.

Her body still remembered him. “Then tell me what I have to do!” Her scent, her voice, her shape,
her skin—everything was still the same, still drove him crazy. Head spinning—so in love, he loved her so, he loved her everything—he heeded her warnings, and stepped back. “But it needs to be you! I have to have you!”

“Rhei, you need to stop—!”

“Should I kiss you?”

“No—and don’t try it—!”

“I have to prove—!”

“You have nothing to prove to me!”

“Kutone, I just need a second chance—I can love you, I know I can—!”

“You can’t, Rhei! We were over the moment I cheated on you—!”

“I can forgive that! I have forgiven it, and I can make love to you right now to prove it!”

“God, dammit, Rhei…”

“Please, Kutone… I’ll do anything—!”

“God, fucking, dammit, Rhei!” She shoved, hard. While Rhei stumbled for his footing, she rushed him. Shoved him again, hard enough to slam him against the wall. “Fucking, damn you, Rhei! Damn you and your timing and your fucking obsession with me—and damn the fact that I still had feelings for you for the past two years! Damn you for taking this long to find me! And damn you for walking away from me! Me! Your partner, your secretary, your goddamn lover for crying out loud!

“Me, Rhei…!” Sobs choked her voice. She cried, angrily, adamantly, and loudly, like she hadn’t cried at all in the past two years. “Me! I fucking loved you! Trusted you! Why would you do that to me?!”

Unfeeling of the numbness needling his back, Rhei slumped to the floor. For a long time, legs crumpled underneath him, and vacantly staring across the room, he had nothing to say, no words to deny her statement. Nothing, except, “I’m sorry.” Before, he would have said they were simply “young and in love.” He couldn’t stand up, not even onto his knees. His body was heavy. Maybe the whiskey was finally starting to get to him, or maybe hitting his thirties had done something to his body.

No.

“Why me?” Kutone wailed.

Facing Kutone’s emotions like he never had before—that was killing him. Sure, she’d been angry before. She’d hit him hard enough to split his skin and leave a mark. Hell, she’d fucked another guy within the same night, before officially breaking up.

Back then, however, she hadn’t cried like this.

“Why were we so naïve?”

Rhei took it though. He took it because he owed her at least that much, because she needed this moment more than he could ever need her. And listening to her sobs, a weight lifted from his chest, like her tears were also his own, at their stupidity, their naivete, the sheer hopelessness of their entire
situation.

So the desperation he’d nursed that entire day, which had spiked when Sam had first mentioned Kutone’s name, evaporated. “Tell me about him,” he said, rubbing his knee with the base of his palm. He smiled lightly at Kutone’s wide eyes. “The guy you walked in with. That’s your new guy, right?”


“Yeah?”

“A little dorky too. But he hides it.” She smiled a little, lifting Rhei’s anxiety that much more. He stopped rubbing his knee and leaned back against the wall, as she went on. “He keeps to himself a lot. I think—I think he tries to act older than he actually feels.”

“For your sake?”

“I don’t think so. I’m not even sure he realizes I’m older than him.” Now she relaxed. Moonlight shone on her reddened cheeks. “He doesn’t do well in crowds. He likes the rain. And he apparently plays keyboard too.”

Sam mentioned that, Rhei recalled.

“He’s always looking out for me. He looks at me and it’s like—it’s like he’s seeing through me.”

“That’s good,” he quietly replied. “You need someone like that.”

Kutone raised her face this time, staring. “Rhei?”

His name on her soft voice—so sweet and relieving, and part of the reason why, he realized, he probably could never stop loving her. Yet, the way she clasped her hands, the embarrassed sideways look she cast on the floor, when she talked about Sebastian—that was even sweeter. “You’re happy,” Rhei concluded. “Being here, away from the city, and meeting someone who makes you smile like that—you’re happy.”

She looked uncertain and contemplative. “If happiness is a destination,” she started, “I don’t think I’m there yet. Even if I were official with Sebastian, there’s still a part of me that’s…” She pulled an even more confounded expression. “That’s still not really there.”

“The country air had breathed life back into her body, and she was just starting to come back. That’s why her guilt and sadness showed like raised prints down her arms, but at the same time, she looked so much more beautiful than before. Her honesty, for once, was doing her good, though her shame threatened to hinder her. “You’ll get there,” he said. “And if this Sebastian’s all that you crack him to be, he’ll accept you, no matter what.”
“Well.” She smiled, sadly. “If he stays in the valley, I guess.”

How much longer did sadness need to be her constant companion? Never again, Rhei thought, would he tolerate seeing Kutone with it. And that, he surmised, was a nice sense of purpose for him. Freed from the weight that planted him on the floor, he stood up and stretched. “Then I’ll have to meet him,” said Rhei. “I’ll have to talk him into staying.”

“For my sake?” Though her eyes were still a little swollen, she had enough spirit to chuckle. “Since when were you a nag?”

“Since just now, now that I finally get that you’re okay. I have to be okay too.”

Thoughtful silence fell over the pair, as Kutone nodded. Okay. It was the perfect word for that moment. Not perfect, not back to before—and they could never be “back to before”—but simply okay. Such an easy word. Why had he and Kutone taken nearly two years to find that word? Amazing, he thought, how those two years seemed to vanish into forgiveness, just by brandishing some honesty and humility.

Kutone levered herself off the wall, her tearful face refreshed and soft. “I’d best head back,” she said.

“Yeah,” Rhei replied. “Sorry to keep you.”

“Don’t be. And Rhei?” She tightened her grip around herself. “I’m sorry, too. For hurting you.”

“We were both stupid,” he muttered. Noting the bob of her head in a nod, he couldn’t choke his smile. “Really fucking stupid.”

They headed toward the door, Kutone hurriedly wiping her wet eyes and breathing deep. “Rhei,” she started again, hand on the doorknob, “You’ll have to give me some time to set up for the display, but, I can walk around the fair with you.”

Before, excitement would have made him giddy. This time, he was just content. “Do what you have to do,” he replied. “I’ll be okay.”

He let Kutone leave first, as he turned toward the set dinner table again. Retrieving his glass, he shook the ice inside once more, their clinks cooling his nerves again. Then, spotting the red carnation, he considered the flower. Thought about the key and ring in his pocket.

Reached over the table, and snapped the carnation at its stem. Let the blooming petals crumple on the table.

A rather nice image, Rhei thought. And fitting.
“So you haven’t even confessed?”

When Sam got curious, or otherwise way too involved, Sebastian’s nerves became the unfortunate collateral. And with the Stardew Valley Fair coming to life behind them, the grating aggravation doubled in intensity, even in their corner away from the festivities. What should have been Sebastian’s refuge from the teeming activity, therefore, now felt like his prison.

Instead of voicing this, however, he cast a doubtful glare in Sam’s direction, earning a deliberate shrug. “I just don’t get it, y’know? You like her, Seb. And you’re gonna sit there, smoke, and tell me to chill out?”

Of course, Sebastian hadn’t divulged the details of his talks with Kutone to Sam. At least, nothing beyond the fact the businessman who’d come for Joja Mart’s performance review—and left one so scathing Morris had called out sick and closed the Mart for the festival—was Kutone’s ex.

While Sam’s views on Rhei had wildly swung from favorable to total distaste, Sebastian’s perspective remained strangely stable. Beginning with mostly dislike, based on Kutone’s talk, Sebastian had then learned a sharp, gutting hatred for the man the moment Kutone identified him at the Saloon. It was over the ensuing, unusually rocky game of pool that Sebastian then parsed his thoughts into coherence. After all, simple dislike never felt this complicated, this mix of both aversion and awe.

First, Sebastian realized after some observation, Rhei exuded perfection in his every action. The crisp suit, the one loose button at his collar, the gleam of his wristwatch and leather dress shoes, the attache case over his shoulder, even the casually messy fringes of his hair and his well-maintained stubble—all features of the accomplished young businessman Sebastian thought only existed in soap operas and TV commercials. Even Sam gaped as Rhei strode along through the plaza, Kutone at his side.

“I can’t chill out—look at him! If I were his ex, I’d date him again!”

She wouldn’t, according to Kutone after the past Friday evening, when she’d emerged puffy-eyed and wet-cheeked from the saloon’s private dining room. Rhei had left to find his lodging for the weekend, leaving with only a nod in Sebastian’s direction. We talked, Kutone had said. I got angry, I told him off, but we’ve settled things. I’m okay now.

As Sebastian walked her back to the Banks, she’d talked slowly, and clearly struggled to choose the right words to tell her story. I don’t want you to misunderstand me, she said. I’m not going back to him, and he’s going to stop chasing me. I just wanted to bury our misery, you know?

No, he didn’t know, especially seeing her so willing to talk to her former boss and ex. Jealous? Sure. This was Kutone’s first Fair in the valley, after all, and a strangely forward part of Sebastian wanted to be her guide through the festival. He’d been so close to asking her—Hey, he’d rehearsed, we should go together. To the Fair—but then she’d said The Other Guy’s name. “Only for a little bit,” Kutone had added. “It’s not a date, I promise.”

Sebastian’s old bitterness, his best friend from the dark, found its voice then. “Sure, I bet that’s what he said too, right?”
He regretted it immediately, seeing an understanding melancholy shadowing Kutone’s features. While Sebastian struggled to take back his words, Kutone lingered on her veranda, replying, “No. It was my suggestion. For closure.” She’d paused for a while, letting the babbling rivers of the Banks lengthen the distance between them. “I’m sorry,” she’d finally said. “I’m the worst for this kind of thing. You really shouldn’t wait for me.”

His jealousy was stupid, his bitterness an asshole, but after Kutone had crept back into her house, Sebastian had inwardly promised to keep his faith in her. That moment on the beach—rain pouring, clouds in the distance, and their hands tightly intertwined—that quiet pulse between them warding off the chill of the rain, that had been real. They were alive, together, and even if they never put words to it, Sebastian had, for the first time in his life, known for certain he had something good, something real to believe in. Something—someone—that could convince him to stay in the valley, someone who could show him both the lights and shadows he’d failed to catch on his own. This unknown, black part of Kutone’s past, the part she hid under her melancholy expressions and lovable smiles—Sebastian knew he was stepping into dangerous territory, but he desperately wanted—needed—to know. Maybe he was drunk off the exposure to Kutone’s vulnerability, and knowing and touching and somehow having that power over her guarded façade. Or he simply wanted to see her happy, and decided to wait until she was ready for him.

The convoluted nature of his crush confused him badly, so he stopped himself from watching Kutone with Rhei, as they perused the Fair’s booths. They didn’t seem to be talking much, even as Rhei examined the townspeople’s hand-crafted wares with wonder. But their pace together, their complementing gestures, even Rhei’s height over Kutone—they all synced together so perfectly, Sebastian’s doubt refreshed anew every time he cast a glance in their direction.

And this was Sebastian’s second realization, the ultimate conclusion to his internal analysis: Sebastian could never, ever, not even in his dreams, bring out the Kutone he saw with Rhei. A cool, mature, adult woman that Rhei’s presence brought out like a fond memory. A steady, anchoring force to Rhei’s flamboyance. In himself, Sebastian thought, there was only childishness, and a vaguely desperate want to find that spark again, to hold on to that feeling of I’m so alive.

He was still a boy.

And that, Sebastian concluded, was why he hurt so bad to watch them—despite their fragmentation, Rhei and Kutone still looked like close partners, romantic and otherwise. That was the feeling, Sebastian knew, that had Sam so agitated as well.

For Sam’s sake, as well as his own, he needed to calm down. He took a long drag of his cigarette, and blew a threadlike plume of smoke into the clear autumn sky. Watching those wisps, a product of his own breath, brought him down to earth. “She told me they’re done,” Sebastian finally replied. “They just need some time on their own. Closure or something like that.”

Sam rubbed his temples, and shook his head, aggravated. “It’s cute you hold Kutone to her word—no, it really is, I’m not teasing you or anything!—but you don’t know a lick of nothing about that guy she’s with! The man’s as smooth and cool as they come! I’d be afraid of introducing him to my mother—or yours or Abby’s or—Yoba forbid it—Penny’s for that matter!”

Distantly, Sebastian could hear the clicking spins, the crashing bottles, the twang of a fishing line, even the ringing bell of the strength test—all games he hoped he wouldn’t turn to see Rhei trying with Kutone. Would he try to win her something? According to veteran gamer Abigail, the Stardew Valley Fair’s prize corner even included a Stardrop in its repertoire. Maybe he didn’t even need to play the games. A businessman like Rhei could probably buy all the tokens he needed to buy that legendary fruit, and then some more.
He sighed, trying to clear his head of worry. It didn’t work.

Concerned Sam crossed his arms as he watched the smoke lifting in ribbons from the end of Sebastian’s cigarette. After a few moments, he snorted and faintly smiled. “Sometimes, Seb,” he started, “it’s real hard to get a good read on you, but you’ve got your heart on your sleeve today.”

“More dumb lyrics?”

“Nice try, lovebird.”

“I’m not—!”

“I’ve never seen you so damn worried about anything like this.”

“It’s…” Sebastian absently flicked the ash off his diminishing cigarette. The tips of his ears, the tops of his cheeks and nose, felt way too hot. “It’s just a crush.”

“Oh yeah, I bet.” Sam snickered and lightly punched his friend in the shoulder. “A crush that, if she brought a bouquet to you today and said she wanted something more serious, you’d jump on that like a frog on a lily pad.”

He couldn’t deny that. Really, they were already past that, and just needed to be official, but Sam didn’t need to know that either. “She makes me feel like I matter,” Sebastian mumbled. “Like I’m worth something, not just, rotting away. She says ‘thank you’ to me and really means it. She talks to me, she confides in me—she trusts me.”

Unbeknownst to Sam or Sebastian, Abigail had poked in between them. She listened to their conversation for a moment, and the more she heard Sebastian’s words, the deeper she frowned. Finally putting her hands on her hips, she curled her lip and narrowed her eyes. “Then you have to tell her that,” she cut in, earning a surprised jump from her two friends. “Geez, Seb, we figured you liked her a lot, but I hoped you’d be a little more adventurous than this.”

“What’s it to you?” Sebastian shot back. “I thought you were off playing games.”

“Beat them all already,” replied Abigail,shrugging. “Hardly a challenge for me anymore; it’s kinda boring. But this?” She wagged a finger, indicating her dispirited friend. “Friend Sebastian, methinks you’re in a crisis you could easily solve just by opening your mouth a little.”

Sam nodded in agreement. “Which we know is a challenge for you.”

Abigail grinned. “So that got me thinking…”

When a certain pacing in Sam and Abigail’s conversation started matching strides, Sebastian knew he was in trouble. He uncertainly glanced from one to the other, then back again. “Whatever it is you’re thinking,” he slowly started, “no.”

“But Kutone’s over there at the Clairvoyance Booth with her friend,” replied Abigail. “Don’t you want to crash it a little? Haley’s been raving about the accuracy of the place, and it looks like the guy insisted on taking a shot at it.”

Rhei did? Surprising for a businessman of his evident caliber. Then again, everyone had uncertainties they wanted clarified. In Rhei’s case… “Probably asking about his relationship with Kutone.”

Which quickly had Sam shoving on his back, and Abigail pulling on his sleeve, south toward the lone tent of the fortuneteller. Sebastian protested and fought back, but lost his zeal the moment his
friends forced him around the corner and into the clearing of the nearby graveyard. Haley and Alex—a whole other problem, if Abigail really had seen Kutone alone with Alex on multiple occasions—had formed a trio with Kutone, who listened to the results of both of their fortunes, while Rhei took his turn with the seer. He leaned in close over the crystal ball, nodded at the seer’s replies, scratched his head… Like he was dejected by the answer he got. But finally, Rhei squared his shoulders, breathed, and left the tent.

Instead of rejoining Kutone, however, he left a tap on her shoulder, and brushed past her on his way back to the craftsmen’s booths. She seemed not at all bothered, and giving a wave to Alex and—what’s with that sheepish, hopeful blush, Alex?!—Haley as they meandered off toward the strength test, met Abigail’s eye, and met their trio on the other side of the clearing.

Sam and Abigail nearly dropped Sebastian from their grasps, as they greeted Kutone. “You three are trying Welwick too?” asked Kutone, raising her brow.

“I’m into this stuff,” Abigail replied too merrily. “So I’m trying to get Sam and Seb to try it out too.”

Sam rubbed his nose and grinned wide. “Gotta find out if I’m gonna be a rock star! And then this guy…” He sharply elbowed Sebastian. “This guy’s got his own questions to ask, right?”

“Not really, no.”

Abigail’s and Sam’s pointed glares almost hurt, but Kutone remained oblivious. She shook her head and softly smiled, a tenderness that made Sebastian nearly choke on his own cigarette. “It’s worth the 100g, depending on what you ask,” she said. “I had a mixed fortune.”

While Sebastian made out the slight pink in her features, she also looked a little concerned. “What did you get?” He could feel Sam’s and Abigail’s encouraged expressions on him, and in response, shot them warning looks. Shut up, he thought, but their dumb grins wouldn’t disappear.

“A ‘great darkness bearing down’ on me,” Kutone replied. “Apparently, it’s questionable if I can deal with it. Not that I hold any stock in that.” She crossed her arms. “I care more about the couple good things she said, about, well…” Here, she faintly, meaningfully smiled. “About certain people.”

Before Sebastian could speculate, a thin reedy voice beckoned to the group. “Young man,” said the old woman at the booth, “I’ve business with you, young man.”

He’d never believed in fortunes, never seeing luck as a good factor in his life. Yet, compelled by the old seer’s beckoning voice, like that of a dungeon master over a tabletop game, Sebastian turned and dragged his steps toward the booth. Who knows, he thought, this could be a free fortune, and if the seer tried to charge him for a half-baked scrying session, he could probably argue his way out. Probably. He put out his cigarette first, and with Sam, Abigail, and Kutone watching, he stood before Welwick and her crystal ball.

The tent, he realized, was completely unassuming, just like the rest of the red and white tents around the Fair. No fake pasted stars, no lights or candles, just the hooded old woman and the glowing crystal ball before her. She never took her eyes off the glow, and didn’t seem to blink either, as she cupped her hands over the relic. “Ha, another child of Void, I see,” said the seer. “This valley still continues to attract dualities, does it?”

At least these words sounded about as phonily mystical as Sebastian expected. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “So? What are you trying to divine with whatever magic you say you’ve got?”

The seer’s shoulders shook with hidden laughter. “Matters regarding a certain girl,” she whispered
with a simper. “Kutone has planted a seed of light in your shrouded heart, has she?”

Did his expressions around her betray him that badly? How much of the town knew, then? Or had Sam and Abigail blabbed about it to their mothers, who in turn talked to each other and anyone else who would listen? Gods, what if his own mother already knew? Or Maru? Demetrius?! And what were they whispering to each other? He knew too painfully well, seeing Kutone working so damn hard every day, whether on the Banks or in town, or in the mines, or, hell, even at festivals like this—they’d say he was too lazy, too unaccomplished for a person like her—

“Not to worry, Sebastian. Your friends have not betrayed you.” The seer rested her hands on the table. “I understand your desire to carefully guard that light. And I recommend you continue to do so—much of your destiny intertwines with hers.”

“She lives in the valley,” Sebastian scoffed, attempting to mask the rush of his thoughts. “Kind of a no-brainer.”

The seer clicked her tongue and cackled again. “Oh to be young and skeptical again. And yet, I know you’ll take heed of my words.” She gestured to the crystal ball. “I see you with her on a riverbank, and you’re both smiling so happily.”

His skepticism momentarily stopped with his heartbeat. A riverbank? That could be anywhere on the farm. And he was there, happy, with her? Covering his flushed face with his hand, he mumbled his reply. “…What are we so happy about?”

“Matters of the heart are not for me to see,” said the seer. “I can only see the future actions of my subjects, much as I would love to see within their hearts as well. Ah—yes—this here, this image of you is why I needed to speak with you.”

Sebastian tried staring into the murky cloudiness of the crystal ball, but saw nothing, except smoke that looked like his own.

Thankfully, the seer obliged an explanation. “You’re at the shore of a lake,” she started, hands held aloft. “It is a deep, deep night when all the stars above dance alive—and then they fall.”

So a meteor shower was coming to the valley soon? If so, maybe the seer could note the season—

“I see you catching one of those falling stars, Sebastian.” The seer’s voice crackled with a smile. “It responds to that seed of light within you, and bears fruit to the greatest gift you will ever give.”

Confused? Definitely. But excited? Strangely so, as though the seer spoke to someone else within him. Someone who bloomed and flared at the thought of the seer’s talk being possibly real, real like the moment he’d held Kutone’s hand. Out of everything Sebastian had heard the seer say, this talk of him catching stars was by far the most absurd, and yet, a part of him believed it, or at least, desperately wanted to believe it. Whatever this “greatest gift” was, he hoped Kutone was the recipient. He hoped like he’d never dared to before, and his heartbeat, unused to the constant stream of positive thought, knotted itself around his throat.

He nodded in reply to the seer, reached into his pocket for his wallet, and left 200g on the seer’s table. “No change,” he murmured, turning away. As he sauntered back to Sam and Abigail, he pulled out a fresh cigarette and lit up again.

It didn’t taste very good.

And Kutone had disappeared.
Abigail answered Sebastian’s wordless search around the clearing. “She’s gone off to set up her grange display,” she said.

“And that businessman’s with her,” Sam added, on his toes and squinting toward the town square. “Man, the guy’s cool and all, but that’s my best friend’s future girlfriend he’s hanging out with…”

Sebastian flinched. “What do you mean, future?”

Abigail grinned. “Oh but I thought we’d just established you’d be happy to get more serious with Kutone.”

“That was speculation.”

Sam mirrored Abigail’s expression. “Just think, Seb, how you’d feel deep down inside if and-or when you’re allowed to call her your girlfriend.”

If I could call her my… Embarrassment seemed to set his entire body on fire. Were it not an obvious window into his thoughts, Sebastian would have pulled up his hood and covered his face.

Sam whistled anyway. “Look at him. Like a frog on a lily pad on a rainy day.”

He could give her gifts. He could make impromptu visits to the Banks, and maybe even help her with the work. He could invite her to other town events, and he could show her around to the places he considered his secret spaces. He could walk her back every single night, and maybe stay over sometimes. And on those nights he stayed, maybe he could finally sleep through an entire night, and then wake up next to her in the morning. He could give her his sweatshirt to stay warm during the winter, and he could take it back and wrap himself up in her scent.

He could catch stars for her, and maybe, someday, lying next to her with her body flush against him, he could tell her, I love you.

He didn’t, he realized, want to wait for her anymore. “How…” His voice trembled too much; he cleared his throat. “How do I let her know I’m serious about her?”

Sam pumped his fist, as Abigail laughed. “Same way as she would—but I’m not letting my friend use any old generic bouquet. Come on.”

After giving Sebastian a moment to snuff out his cigarette, they passed the craftsmen’s booths, where his mother and Demetrius spoke animatedly with Leah, and rounded the corner past the carnival games and the Fair’s discount clown. Against the town clinic and general store, the mayor had situated a row of great terraced boxes, three of which were already filled with grange contestants’ wares. The gagging odor of fish and bait wafted from Willy’s display, farthest away, while a giant cheese wheel adorned Marnie’s like a great wedge of gold. She even had photos and illustrated-by-Jas pictures of the ranch’s livestock and fowl pasted everywhere.

Next to Marnie’s dairy show, Kutone arranged bundles of amaranth on the edges of the display’s tiers, while an awed Rhei examined her baskets of cranberries before nestling them against the amaranth. They pointed and gestured across the terraced display, discussing placements of vegetables and dairy products like the old coworkers they once were. Sebastian ached to see them getting along, but at the same time, could tell Kutone had an impressive display to show. He could admit he was excited to see it, if anyone asked.

Rivalling Kutone’s budding display was Pierre’s, always impeccable every year the fair came through. He marveled his own display with a puffed chest, and laughed loudly whenever a sightseer stopped by to watch the glistening shine of his produce. While Abigail paid no mind to her dad’s
bluster, and brushed past him to Caroline, Sebastian and Sam stopped.

Sam’s features sparkled. “Geez, Pierre, you really know how to make veggies look like they taste good.”

Pierre lifted his glasses past the bridge of his nose. “Comes with the business, m’boy!” he said, and cast a sweeping arm across his display. “This! This is the country quality everyone should be shopping for! Should be proud to be shopping for! I provide this to the town, don’t you know?”

Rhei, overhearing this conversation, leaned over to whisper something into Kutone’s ear. While he laughed at his own remark, Kutone landed a sound punch on his shoulder. “Don’t be an asshole,” she replied. “Your company made him that way.”

He pushed a pumpkin onto the highest tier of Kutone’s display. “Was yours too at one point,” he responded, grinning.

Anyone else, Sebastian irritably thought, would have considered that interaction endearing. Especially with his suit jacket off and the sleeves of his undershirt rolled up, Rhei looked so refreshed, charming even. Kutone did that to him.

Kutone, who, with a nudge from Rhei, looked up from her display to Sebastian, and smiled. “Hey,” she said, tucking a fringe of her hair—*god, with that little twist of her wrist, too*—behind her ear. “Done with the fortuneteller?”

“Y-yeah.” He had her attention, if even for just a moment. He didn’t want to let go. “It was decent.”

“Surprising review, coming from you.”

“Either that, or she really knew how to smooth-talk me.”

Sam joined in, leaning on Sebastian’s shoulder. “How’re you feeling about your display, Kutone?”

She considered a moment, then met Sebastian’s eye. “Decent,” she said with a chuckle. “Maybe a little unconfident, being next to Pierre.”

“You’ll do fine.” He had a desperate need, Sebastian realized, to make her smile. Of course, he had no clue where to start. He was hardly warm enough to offer any substantial consolation, and the words alone felt foreign and sour in his mouth. Even Sam turned an incredulous look, and seeing Kutone’s surprise on top of that, Sebastian wished he’d kept his mouth shut. Rhei being within earshot, however, pressured him so badly to prove, somehow, he could be warm enough for Kutone. He fought to keep his blush in check. “I mean, you’ve been working hard for the entire year—it’ll show.”

Then, there it was, her soft smile that made his chest flip backwards and melt into mush. “Thanks, Sebastian,” Kutone replied. She put her hands on her hips. “It feels good, getting some validation.”

Rhei was watching with a thoughtful look, when Sam whispered urgently. “Seb, you’re red. You okay?”

Which pushed him too close to his limit. Shaking Sam off his shoulder, Sebastian turned on his heel and stalked off, his heartbeat pumping too loud in his ears to hear Sam concocting an excuse for him.

He didn’t get far, because as he passed Abigail and Caroline, the former yanked him aside by his sleeve, and dragged him behind the clinic and general store. Sam followed with concerned Caroline behind him.
Once clear of the Fair crowd, Abigail snickered. “Thank you, friend,” she said, “because you made things a lot easier to explain.”

Caroline clasped her hands and smiled. “Abby kept going on about a secret bouquet order she wanted me to do,” she started. “I wish you would have told me yourself, Sebby—we could have saved you the embarrassment there.”

Mortification paled Sebastian into silence, as he turned a vacant expression to a grinning Abigail.

Sam, arms crossed, nodded approvingly. “We need to cement your position as The New Boyfriend,” he said. “And what’s a better method than a custom bouquet?” He flashed a thumbs-up to Abigail. “Nice thinking, Ab.”

“The plan is,” Abigail continued, “Mom will make you a custom bouquet for Kutone. It’ll be ready for pickup tonight, so once the Fair’s over, you’ll come by for it, and go straight to the Banks. Make sure she’s alone, without that dandy next to her, else who knows what kind of drama he’ll spark? With us so far, Seb?”

“No.” His head pounded. The world spun around him. He couldn’t meet Caroline’s eye, or Sam’s grin, or Abigail’s pout. “No, I’m not—this isn’t how I want to do it! This isn’t…!” This, meaning the last thing he wanted today, was a Pelican Town mom figuring out his feelings for Kutone. Once one Pelican Town mom found juicy gossip, she passed it on to the next mom. In this case, probably Jodi. Then Marnie, and then eventually, Robin.

And once it got to Robin, Sebastian could count down the days until his inevitable, crippling humiliation.

Caroline, oblivious to her role in Sebastian’s downfall, had her fingers pressed to her lips, but, strangely, she didn’t seem offended. Rather, she cast baleful glances to both Sam and Abigail. “Abby,” she sternly said, “you told me he wanted this order?”

“I don’t,” Sebastian snapped back before Abigail could clarify. “Sorry, Caroline!”

He barely registered Caroline’s understanding nod, as he turned again and strode away, leaving Sam and Abigail to wither under Caroline’s glare. Every fiber in Sebastian wanted to hide. Really, who else knew now? Who else had seen him so embarrassed, and yet so delighted, to talk to Kutone? He went through a list, as he skimmed past the Fair’s southern barriers, not even noticing his mother’s grin changing into a concerned frown as he stormed past without a word. Distantly, Lewis began announcing the results for the grange display.

By then, Sebastian had crossed the bridge and veered west, disappearing completely from the Fair.

He was on his fifth cigarette for the day, and the sun was still high above him. But at least, with the sea lapping the pier and the breeze carrying the smoke from his lips far away, Sebastian finally had quiet. The shore’s cool air had, at long last, dampened the flare of his humiliation, leaving behind a heavy exhaustion in his body. With Lonely Rock ahead of him, and the sea’s horizon even further ahead, Sebastian, sitting at the end of the pier, stared absently beyond, concentrating on nothing but the sea and smoke relieving his nerves.

His friends, he thought, were only looking out for him. They’d seen his wistful expressions, his quiet seething, his melancholic worry—so of course they wanted to help him and his hopelessly needy crush. Because that’s what it boiled down to—everything Sebastian ever wanted in his life, simply
hopeless. He never reached out, and even when he was invited in, he chose to stay outside, on the
sidelines, simply watching.

With another plume of smoke, he took back his earlier thought, about having some kind of power
over her façade. Knowing Kutone had her own burdens, he was terrified, absolutely cowed at the
thought of fully stepping into her world. What if, Sebastian thought, he actually couldn’t support her
the way she needed from a significant other? What if she decided to completely close herself off from
him? What if, after she dealt with him, she realized she really had it better with Rhei? What then?

_I shouldn’t_, he thought. _I can’t._

Through the break and ebb of the waves, the squeak of leather and the clops of shallow heels on the
wooden pier echoed toward him.

_No_, Sebastian begged. _Please, no, no one else—I can’t—_

“Nice hangout spot. Almost couldn’t find you in time.”

While every reflex pushed him to ignore the voice, Sebastian craned a glance over his shoulder.
There, with attache case over his shoulder, and crumpled suit jacket draped over his arm, stood Rhei
Young, still with a refreshed glow in his features. Sebastian sighed, and turned back to the horizon.

“Boy, ‘gloomy’ was invented for you,” Rhei chuckled. “Mind if we talk?”

“I do mind,” Sebastian snapped back. “But you’re standing there, so I doubt you’re going to leave
me alone.”

“Due to feelings regarding the same woman,” Rhei softly replied, “I can’t leave you alone.”

He sighed again. Loudly. “So, what, is this the part where you tell me you and her are happily back
together again? Should I back off, swallow my pipe dreams and go along my way? I can do that—
been always doing that; it's no problem for me.”

“When I know how fond she is of you? Give me a little credit, kid. I’m not thirty-two for nothing.”

Sebastian nearly swallowed his own cigarette, but kept his gaze ahead. “She’s got you,” he said,
clenching his hands into fists, fighting to quell the tremor in his voice. “You in all your perfect,
accomplished glory. What more could she want?”

Rhei groaned, loudly and irately. “Oh, _grow up._”

As Sebastian finally turned to face him, Rhei went on. “Perfect? I only look the part for work’s sake,
but I’m only human. And this human _ruined_ her life.”

Jealousy and bitterness, Sebastian thought again, were such stupid, _stupid_ emotions. “Sorry,” he
replied. “I just—I’ve been—I’m sorry.”

He thought long, and hard, about his childishness, about the way he’d stormed away from Sam and
Abigail, who’d only been trying to help him after he’d asked for advice. About the fact he’d missed
seeing Kutone’s completed display, as well as hearing her results. He pressed his hand to his
forehead. “She’s an amazing person,” Sebastian blurted, “and I don’t feel I’m even _allowed_ to like
her. And seeing her with you—you worked together so well—I don’t—I just _can’t_ be allowed to like
her, can I?”

“Stop,” said Rhei. “Look inside yourself, kid. You think about her, and then what?”
Sebastian pressed a fist against his chest. *Fuzzy,* he thought. *Achy, right here.* Surprising, how easily Rhei got him to think. Maybe it was because of his prior words: *I know how fond she is of you.* “I want to see her smile,” he mumbled, “and I want to listen to her talk, and I want—*shit.*” He lifted his hand over his eyes, and covered his face. “For a guy who doesn’t have his shit together, I want too much of her.”

“That’s on you. But for fuck’s sake, if you love her, *love* that girl to death.”

He felt like an admonished child, and yet, validated. “I decided I’d wait for her. Until she’s ready.”

“She’ll leave you in the dust if you wait too long.”

Sebastian turned an uncertain gaze up to Rhei. “What about you? You’d be okay with me and her?”

For a long moment, Rhei held a completely unreadable expression, as he stared across the sea and, seemingly, beyond the horizon. Then, with a smirk, he reached into the inner pocket of his jacket. “Promise me something,” he started. “Keep this between you and me.”

Crouching to Sebastian’s level, Rhei pulled his hand out and opened his palm. A plain metal key, and an equally plain—barring the knot-like shape in its center—silver ring glinted in the sun, despite the dull patches of tarnish mottling them both. “The key to Kutone’s old apartment,” said Rhei. “At least, a copy of her key.”

A copy of her key. That’s how many times Rhei had visited Kutone’s apartment. How much she’d trusted him, that he could invite himself into her private world without her permission. Sebastian nearly choked on his own realization: Rhei and Kutone had been a lot closer than the latter’s insinuations. Meaning that ring…

“Hey, don’t look so scared,” Rhei chuckled.

“That’s a promise ring.”

“Sure is—not that Kutone ever knew about it.”

“But you were that serious about her.”

“Sure was.” Rhei closed his palm over the two trinkets. “On my ride out here, I had it all planned out in my head. I’d give her back her key, tell her I love her, ask her to forgive me. Depending on the flow of that conversation…” He inhaled deeply, held it, and blew out a long, heavy breath. “I’d propose to her.”

Never could he ever, not even in Sebastian’s wildest dreams, be like this man. Assertive, confident, determined—all features Sebastian hurt to re-realize, he lacked. And there it was again, the resulting jealous twinge that flavored his thoughts bitter.

“Like I said,” Rhei huffed, “don’t look so scared. Watch.”

Still keeping a tight fist around the key and the ring, Rhei stood up from his crouch. Grinned down at Sebastian’s confused expression. Then, he stepped back, quickly skidded forward, and with a wide throw of his arm, opened his palm.

Sebastian shot to his feet, reaching out for Rhei’s arm. “Hey, wait—!”

The sun caught a glimmer of the key and the ring one last time, before they splashed into the brine.
past Lonely Rock. While Rhei rolled the shoulder of his throwing arm, Sebastian gaped.

“I’m more than okay with you and her.” Rhei let the words hang on the sea breeze, and dragged a hand through his hair. “In fact, I’m entrusting her to you.”

While Sebastian grappled with this statement, Rhei grinned, mischief adding a glow to his features. “You should see her when she talks about you. Hearts in her eyes and everything.”

“Hey…”

“You have plans to leave the valley?”

“Plans,” Sebastian echoed. “Not much more than that.”

The mischief went out. Rhei shook his head, and pinched the crease between his brow and nose bridge. “I swear to all the goodness in Yoba, if I find her sad and hurt again because you left her here, I will physically hurt you.”

“I am rethinking it,” Sebastian shot back. “She’s one of the few things I don’t want to leave behind.” He ground his cigarette into the pier, scuffing it out into oblivion. He kept it pressed down, as he murmured on, “I like her a lot. I could love her to death. I’m about to.”

Rhei cracked a smile. “She has that effect on a guy.”

For a while, they remained silent. Rhei, Sebastian thought, wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d imagined. The real-life soap opera he expected never aired. “How’d she do on the display?”

“A solid 89 out of 100,” Rhei responded. “Any distributor would want to be her vendor. Including me.”

“You?”

“Yeah, when I break off from Joja.” Rhei shrugged at Sebastian’s baffled expression. “Coming out here, breathing this air and helping Kutone out today—I woke up, I really did. I’m putting in my letter of resignation when I get back to the city.”

“Kutone knows?”

“I told her after she got her results. I’ll break off. I’ll start my own gig. And if Kutone keeps up the quality of her goods, I want to be her vendor.” He grinned brightly. “I’m still young enough for a pipe dream or two. And no, it’s not some underhanded ploy to get her back.”

Sebastian returned a sneer. “Even if you did try, I wouldn’t let you.”

Because, for her, I will catch a falling star.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, my name is andagii, and I have a tendency to write poetry into my prose. In this case, I wanted poetic effect as well as [REDACTED FOR SPOILERS].

In further news, I am approaching burnout. I need a small break. Not yet, though--
there's a certain point in the fic I want to get to before I do so! I'm seeing about another 4 chapters before then, but I really hope you'll give me your understanding. If I hit total burnout, the quality of the chapters will go down. Significantly. And I'd hate to do that to you all who come back and keep reading.

So there you have it. 4 more chapters, and andagii must take a break. You can still find me at my tumblr if you want to chat or privately send me comments!
Night cast its starry veil over the skies of Pelican Town, as the Fair wound down. While second place overall in the display contest netted Kutone a sizable handful of tokens, her old despondence set in again. She leaned against the lowest tier of her display—beautifully arranged in her opinion—and with Pierre’s raucous bluster bugling behind her, she sighed. “Not even 90?” she mumbled. “Lewis could have rounded up a little, couldn’t he?”

Maybe it was a good thing Sebastian had disappeared, and stayed disappeared, during Lewis’s announcement of the results. Just because he’d encouraged her beforehand, didn’t necessarily mean he would have stuck around for her sake. The guy had his own interests, and most likely, he couldn’t care less about Kutone’s farming efforts. Encouragement was just another form of being nice. And Sebastian was good at being nice.

And Rhei? Checked his watch once, took a quick survey of the rest of the fair, said “I’ll be in touch,” and then rushed off. To where? Kutone had shrugged off the concern a long time ago. Although his absence meant she barely had any help to take down her display, maybe, she thought, it was better for him to have left so abruptly. No lingering around, no space for maybes, and no probing questions from the townspeople, who already regarded Rhei as a friend of the valley. Even Pierre, despite knowing Rhei still worked with Joja, couldn’t stay cold for long.

“You know what’s different about him, your friend?” Pierre, still drunk from his victory, shouted across to Kutone as he handed produce to Caroline. “He’s got a real eye for quality—the type of eye that shouldn’t be wasting away at Joja! Tell him to get out of there, Kutone! He can be my vendor out in the city!”

“Well, Rhei is Joja’s chief merchandise executive,” said Kutone. “It’s hard to give up a good position like that.”

“But is it worth it?” Pierre crossed his arms and nodded sagely. “That’s the real question! I think he’s asking himself that right now too, and you could be the one to push him to a good decision! You’re close with the guy, extremely close—!”

“Pierre,” Caroline coughed. “We need to rearrange the shop front for your promotional display.”

Pierre took the distraction with a lively gusto, as Kutone breathed in relief. So, she and Rhei still looked intimate. That, she thought, was a massive fucking problem. She pondered, as she absently stroked the ends of one of her twin tails. Where her feelings—her anger, humiliation, affection, sadness—for Rhei had been, padded contentment patched the hole in her heart. They were okay. Could be friends if they distanced each other a little more, and truthfully, once he broke off from Joja and started his own thing, like he promised he would, distance would come naturally. Not having a workplace in common helped with that sort of thing.

She climbed up the tiers of the display, and with a grunt, dragged off the centerpiece pumpkin from the top. Though the display case creaked and groaned against her combined weight, she cleared it with a stumbling leap, and gently placed the pumpkin on the ground. If only she didn’t have to lug it back to the Banks. Maybe Abigail would buy it. Better yet, maybe Pierre could buy the entire display from her. It did get a good 89 out of 100, after all.
“You’re gonna need help getting that stuff back, right?”

Kutone turned to find, to her astonishment, Rhei approaching. With Sebastian. Since when had they got along? Or did they? Sebastian seemed his usual dour self, especially next to Rhei’s sunniness, but it wasn’t the kind of dourness that bordered on annoyance. She cast a questioning look to Rhei. “Didn’t you have a bus to catch tonight?”

“Tomorrow,” Rhei replied. “I can use vacation time.”

“Well,” said Kutone, turning next to Sebastian. “Robin’s not going to need you?”

Sebastian shrugged. “She’s got Demetrius. And Leah volunteered.”

“Then I appreciate whatever help I can get. Thanks.”

Between their three armfuls and a couple roundtrips to and from the Fair, Kutone, Sebastian, and Rhei fashioned themselves into an unlikely trio. Rhei did most of the talking, interrupted by Kutone’s interjecting quips, while Sebastian remained quiet. Occasionally, he offered a sardonic comment that quickly got Rhei going again, and in this manner, they had a friendly banter going.

On their last trip to the Banks, Rhei finally learned about Sebastian’s profession. “Freelance programming?” he mused over the pumpkin in his arms. “No wonder you want to move out of here—all the major software companies are out in the city.”

Kutone internally swatted away her wistful twinge, and shot Rhei a suspicious side-eye. “Perhaps you’d like to sponsor him then?” she said. “Joya knows you’re basically filthy rich.”

“Keyword being ‘basically,’” Rhei shot back. “Have you seen how much they take out for taxes, social security, and health insurance? They bill me like I’m one of the old farts on the highest floors.

“I’d still need to see a resume and some samples anyway.”

Kutone made an about-face mid-step, turning to Sebastian. “There’s your ticket,” she said with a wink. “My father’s got connections, but Rhei might get you places you only dreamed about.”

To her surprise, Sebastian uncertainly replied, “I’ll think about it,” and dropped his thoughtful gaze down to his basket of cranberries.

And he’d been so filled with aspirations before! She stopped to ask, but a nudge from Rhei kept her going. At her inquisitive expression, Rhei leaned in and whispered, “I gave him some food for thought. Let him stew in it a little.”

After that conversation, and for the rest of the way to the Banks, Sebastian said nothing else. Even when Rhei set down the centerpiece pumpkin with a grunt, and waved goodbye to both Sebastian and Kutone, he missed Rhei’s meaningful glare, and caught only a glimpse of Rhei’s back as the man disappeared into the distance of town. And even at the exact moment he seemed to realize he was alone with Kutone, Sebastian clammed up tight. He stood rigid and nearly unbreathing at the bottom of the front steps.

Nervous? Why? Kutone left off arranging her goods on the veranda, and approaching Sebastian, gently took hold of one of the drawstrings on his sweatshirt. “Hey…” she started, but trailed off, suddenly too aware of the fact she’d so easily ventured to touch him.
Then again, she thought, she’d held hands with him already, but holding hands had a different weight than a touch anywhere else. Holding hands was like a steady anchor.

A touch was light, airy, almost a hallucinogenic drug in its intoxicating swell in her chest.

Sebastian shifted from one foot to the other, but didn’t back away. “Walk with me,” he whispered, and turned toward the backwoods road.

The evening autumn chill teased the icy throes of upcoming winter, as they climbed the northern steps and followed the backwoods trail. Moonlight illuminated their path ahead, and elongated their shadows—close enough for a—in their slow walk. At least, Sebastian seemed in no hurry to get to any particular destination. Dirt crunched and shifted under their heels, and from time to time, the brush of autumn wind against fallen foliage covered the pitter-patter of a bolting rabbit or squirrel.

Still they said nothing to each other, even as the roof and chimney of Sebastian’s house emerged from beyond the brush. He stopped though, staring at the lights in the windows, and the mounted telescope in the yard, with a complicated expression. He’s thinking, Kutone thought. Just give him time. Just keep listening. She wanted to touch him again, but in the same instant she brought her hand up, he turned away from the house and nodded toward the mountain’s northern path.

Toward the community bathhouse. Where only the locker rooms were separated by gender, and the underground spa large enough and so thickly curtained with steam, a couple could get downright adventurous in the heat. She thought about water through Sebastian’s hair, and rivulets down his light skin. She thought about hands and touches in all the right places, and she imagined laying sucking kisses on his single piercing, and wondered what pleasure sounded like in his voice…

They walked past her scandalous thoughts, until Sebastian stopped at the railroad crossing.

He took a deep breath, and gingerly grasped her hand again, as they crossed the tracks. “The other quiet spot in town,” Sebastian started. “Sometimes, the train comes by.”

“I hear it from time to time,” Kutone replied, squeezing his hand. “I’m surprised you haven’t jumped on already.”

“I’ve thought about it.” He guided her alongside the tracks, and kept his voice low. “Just, grab one of those rails, right? And let it carry me someplace far away from here.”

So he really was still thinking about it. “What’s stopping you?”

“It’s not the same as riding my bike.”

Fair enough. She could understand the different nuances of a train versus a motorcycle. If Kutone had to pick one or the other, she would have chosen Sebastian’s motorcycle too. “There’s something a little sadder about a train,” she said. “Like, saying goodbye from a train makes it a certain farewell.”

Sebastian pulled a complex expression, one that hinted mostly agreement.

“You know,” he then started, “there’s another reason. Why I haven’t hitched a ride.”

Clarity shone in his features. Before Kutone thought too hard about her own words, she entertained his flow. “What’s the other reason?”

He took another deep breath. His pulse fluttered in his palm. “I’ve been…” Words tumbled and knotted on his tongue, Kutone could tell, from the steadily deepening shades of red across his face,
but she dared not finish his statement. She willed him to slow down, and with another inhale, he tried again. “I’ve started thinking, maybe, the valley isn’t—living out here—maybe it’s not so bad.”

He had a hard time keeping a straight face, and so, stared hard at the ground. His grip on her hand tightened, and transferred his own nervous pulse to her. “You’re here,” he finally mumbled, looking away. “You make me feel like I belong somewhere, and I couldn’t—I don’t want to be away from you. You know?”

He was, Kutone thought, so precious. So pure and beautiful in his honesty, he had a different charm than anyone else she’d ever met. Was that what she loved about him? She lifted her free hand, and this time, brushed her fingers along his jawline, up to the single piercing on his earlobe. “I know,” Kutone replied, smiling as he relaxed into her touch, “because I feel the same.”

A smile flickered, shook. He tried to cough it back, but he couldn’t fight it down. He finally looked up from the ground, and met her gaze. “I like you, you know,” he said, voice trembling. “A lot. And it—I’m—shit…”

“Slowly, Sebastian. I’m listening.”

He breathed in. Held it. Exhaled. “I’m really nervous,” he finally whispered. “I didn’t know I could like someone this much. I think about you and I feel like, for once, I’m worth something. You know?”

I used to know, Kutone thought. And then I tried to forget. Booze and sex and gossip and the neon-lit streets of the city—all textured taints she swore Sebastian could feel through her clothes, as he pulled her in by her waist. How was it that he already knew the contours of her body, and already knew how to piece her so perfectly against him, in spite of her jutting imperfections? His touch smoothened them out, she realized, as he tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, and lifted her face to him.

She knew this pattern, and her heart leapt into her throat as Sebastian touched his nose to hers. The fringes of his hair—so soft against her cheek—tickled an excited tremble through her body. “I might smell,” he mumbled, turning his face away. “I can’t remember how many I’ve smoked today.”

“That’s nothing new,” she replied.

“You’re really okay with someone like me?”

“Like you?”

“I mean—I’m not—I’m not like Rhei.”


“I’ve got nothing like that.”

Ashes and spent tobacco. Sweat, faintly. A dampness from the onset of chilly night. Voice soft, sweet, so melancholic, so Sebastian. Restrained excitement laced his uncertainty—he pressed for her, wanted her, but he counted the things he didn’t have, thought he should have.

But that, Kutone thought, was more than okay. She shook her head. “It has to be you,” she said. “You and everything you have and don’t have.”

“But I have to be worth you—!”
“You have to be you. Only you. I hope that makes sense.”

The starlit night caught his confused blinking, and the crease of his brow, as Sebastian struggled to process Kutone’s words. But slowly, as she ran her fingertips through his hair, assurance eased his consternation. He smirked. Then gently, hesitantly, like the tip of a feather, he touched his lips to her cheek. He broke away for only a second, just barely long enough to whisper her name, and kissed her again, at the corner of her eye. He held it longer, that the smoke on his breath left its mark on her skin. She smiled at his third kiss, light against the corner of her lips, and drew her arms around his waist as he, attempting to hide his embarrassment, pressed his cheek against her head and embraced her tightly.

His quick pulse reverberated through her, and she echoed it back in perfect unison. “Boyfriend?” she murmured, earning a flinch from Sebastian.

He didn’t let go, not even to meet her eyes as he meekly affirmed, “Girlfriend.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaah... late update. Thanks for the patience, folks.

I may come back to edit this later. It could have turned out a little better...

3 more chapters 'til I take my break! Find me at my tumblr for updates, writing shenanigans, and general chatting.
Yes it's an extremely short chapter today, but, the next two chapters are gonna be... *doozies*. Think of this as your calm before the storm. An appetizer to your dinner. The chaser to your shot.

And find me at my [tumblr](https://tumblr.com) if you want to chat or send me writing requests!

Mid-autumn chill quickly sharpened into frostiness, as the auburn months wound down to its last week. As with any time the seasons changed in Pelican Town, a peculiar, expectant hum rose through the citizens, and lately, through Kutone as well. Part of it, she knew, was her anticipation of her first winter vacation in Stardew Valley. No crops, after all, meant she had nothing to worry about, except the animals of the Banks, her kegs and preservation jars, and maybe a few ventures into the mines. But with that starlit night a few weeks prior catching her with Sebastian’s kiss on her cheek, a different type of anticipation seemed to have sparked between them as well.

Nervousness asked, “What now?”

Kutone answered, pressing a hand to her heart, “Now I be careful.”

She strode past the park, on her way to the dilapidated community center, as she mentally took stock of her situation. Was she his first? Because he certainly wasn’t hers, but was he *okay* with that? Did he even have an inkling as to how she’d spent the past five years in the city? How badly she’d hurt Rhei? If he did, was he fragile about that sort of thing?

She hoped to God not, and adjusted her pack, heavy and clattering with more spoils for the community center. By that point in the year, villagers had already seen her traipsing back and forth from the ruined building. They asked, of course, but usually received the answer, “Oh the chimes sound beautiful in there,” or, “It’s a quiet space to reflect a little.” While Kutone hated the half-lie, who in town would actually believe her if she said, “I’m entertaining a bunch of apple-shaped forest fairies?”

She’d tried posing it as a hypothetical to Sebastian. “You don’t sound like you believe yourself,” he’d replied. “Either that, or you’re really good at LARPing and should definitely tell Abigail about it.”

She made a mental note to do the exact opposite, before Sebastian leaned back from his computer and said, with his sardonic smirk, “So returning to your hypothetical—let’s say you really are entertaining a bunch of apple-shaped fairies. Tell me about it.”

He’d treated it as a cute joke for the rest of their conversation, but for Kutone, seeing the shy bouncing apparitions of the Junimos whenever she stepped into the center elicited a gooey kind of fondness in her heart. After discovering the boiler room around and down the corner of the east end of the building, she’d made it her unspoken mission to get it working before winter rolled in. Did spirits or fairies, or whatever the Junimos were, feel the bite and nip of frost on an icy wind?

She could ask, she decided, after she got the boiler room repaired and functioning. It would be a nice
Thank-you gift, wouldn’t it?

The old wooden steps leading down to the boiler room creaked in protest to Kutone’s weight, but she kept her steps lively. In her excitement, she was already sliding her pack off and opening it, as she approached the broken-down boiler. There were eyes on her, expectant eyes, and she swore she heard their eager chirps as well.

She unwound her scarf and pulled off her knitted cap, letting her kinked hair free. Then sitting down, legs crossed, Kutone laid her first small bundle next to the boiler room’s golden tablet. “Copper, bronze, and iron bars,” she started. Already, one of the Junimos crept underneath the bundle of bars, and hefted the gift over its head as Kutone pulled out her next offerings. “Void Essence and Solar Essence.”

She held both pieces up to the light of her glowing ring. “Surreal, isn’t it?” she murmured. “Like holding day and night in my hands.” An agreeing chirp echoed from behind her, but she didn’t turn around. “That essence talk the wizard keeps going on about—this is it, right?”

Another agreeing squeak. She glanced at the swirling black crystal in her left hand. “So I have something like this in me, huh?” Then setting both crystals down next to the tablet, Kutone grinned. “They’re both so pretty.”

Two Junimos approached this time, each picking up one of the crystals before they hopped off back up the corridor.

The last bundle needed a reference to her notes. Kutone pulled out her snap button notebook, as well as the small pack containing the requested goods. “Naturally occurring minerals from the mines,” she read. “Quartz, and its fire variant, an earth crystal, and frozen…”

Frozen Tear. She’d written an extra note next to the list. One of Sebby’s favorites.

An inquiring chirp. She fumbled with her notebook, but after clapping it close to her chest, Kutone quickly pulled out her pen and scratched out the note. I don’t mind the nickname as much anymore, Sebastian had admitted. Blushed. Especially if it’s you saying it. She could barely choke it out when he asked her to say it, but seeing she’d absently written it into the margins—thank goodness Sebastian wasn’t around to see her reaction. He’d taken to lightly teasing her, and likely wouldn’t have let Kutone live this down.

A Junimo touched its little palm to Kutone’s knee.

“S-sorry,” she mumbled. “Frozen tear. It’s in there, promise.” Earning an approving bob, she breathed deeply, as she fought to calm her embarrassment.

Then, a chorus of chirps and squeaks filled the room, and before Kutone could ask the one Junimo carrying off the last bundle, a sea of the little fairies popped into view around her. This time, she dropped her notebook, disregarding the flutter of its pages crumpling on the floor as she gaped at the Junimos bouncing, dancing, and gleefully tittering around her.

A flash of white light washed the boiler room in blinding radiance. She covered her eyes.

A piece of Issu’s promise! A child’s voice, just like before, at the prayer chimes. Kutone squinted through the glimmer. Now we will help you!

Magic, Kutone thought. It was happening in front of her, blinding her. She squeezed her eyes shut and lifted her hands, but the light spilled between her fingers, through her eyelids—Junimo magic blinded every fiber of her body.
More children giggled, although neither mischievously or eerily. Friendly anticipation, Kutone thought. Like they could see the stars she couldn’t, and looked forward to the moment her unseeing human eyes could share their dazzling discovery.

The light faded, along with the Junimos, leaving behind a fully functional boiler room, the boiler itself already roaring with flames, and flanked by filled vats of coal to fuel it. Even the cobblestone floor gleamed under Kutone’s shoes.

She turned in place, her sneakers making the first new scuffs on the floor. The blaze had her shedding her jacket next, and draping it over her arm as she approached and touched the restored walls. Smooth and dry. Clean, anticipating the coats of soot it might accumulate. “Amazing,” she whispered, turning again. “Just—incredible.”

But an unsettling realization slipped into her consciousness. Silence, save for the crackles of the flames on the other side of the boiler’s metal grate. Her own breath and pulse and steps, but no one or nothing else’s. An empty room.

Kutone stepped back, and sat down the floor, the red halo of the fire blinking in her eyes.

Usually, she liked the silence. When she sat on her veranda during the night, when she stood on the shore during the rain, when she walked the length of the mountain lake by the glow of Sebastian’s diminishing cigarette—all silent, lulling, and she enjoyed every moment she got. But this, the quiet inside the community center, where the flames muffled the tones of the distant chimes, the wind’s whistle, and left her so alone…

It was a weird kind of quiet. She wasn’t sure she could get used to it.
The chill of autumn’s end frosted the evening, but Sam sweat through his jacket, as he tore down the lengths and around the corners of the Spirits’ Eve hedge maze. He denied his sight, yet the alternating flares of icy hot knots in his stomach told him, he had nothing to deny.

Take it easy, an inner voice quivered. Take it slow. What do you know?

He knew, firstly, he couldn’t tear through the hedges. It was one of those ongoing Pelican Town mysteries dating from even before his family had moved into the valley. The Spirits’ Eve hedges were impenetrable.

He knew, secondly, the decorations—the hands in the ground, the flickering TV screen, even those spiders Abigail screamed over every year—were all fake. Surely that included the whispers he heard through the hedges’ leaves… Yeah, he was just hearing things. The skulls and bones on the ground were definitely not talking to him, definitely not laughing about “that twin-tailed little woman wandering into the void.”

Nope. Definitely not Kutone, who Sam swore melted into the hedge maze’s dead end. Right?

Not right, else he wouldn’t be half-drowning in his own cold sweat.

Stumbling into fake spider cocoons and showering the ground with a rain of plastic spiders, Sam shot around another corner and barreled straight into Abigail, squeaking and shivering at the trail of spiders behind him.

Sam held his friend’s shoulders in a vice grip. “Abby, tell me you’ve seen Kutone come back through here?”

Features wan, Abigail cast him a baleful look. “Wh-what’s Kutone got anything to do with this?”

She flicked off spiders caught on the fraying threads of Sam’s jacket, and shuddered.

“I lost her. I lost her, Abigail!” He shook her with sweating palms. “I saw her at that dead end, and then she was gone! Poof! Buh-bye! Not there! And I swear to Yoba, the hedges are talking tonight…!”

Brand-new beads of sweat broke over Abigail’s forehead. “Oh, so, it’s not just me hearing a lot more cackling today than usual?”

“No, it’s not, but what do I tell Sebastian?! ‘Sorry bro, I lost your girlfriend in the maze!’ If he doesn’t kill me first, I’m about to lose my best friend!”

Abigail slapped both palms against Sam’s cheeks, cold under her touch. “You won’t!” she snapped. “At least, as long as he doesn’t know…?”

“Lie by omission? Oh, no, no, no—you want me to die, don’t you?” Sam wrenched himself from Abigail’s grasp and ran circles around the fountain. “Kutone! Kutone, I swear to heavenly Yoba, say something, else Seb… Seb’s gonna… Kutone!”
First, the hedge had sucked her in, then spit her out into a cave. Sam’s cries echoed through the dank tunnel, as Kutone ran her palms along the dewy walls and crept along. She called back—Sam? Sam! I’m alright! Don’t worry about me!—but within seconds, his shouts evaporated into the muffled distance, leaving Kutone with no guiding sound but her breath, her palpitations, and the low drone of wind through the dark tunnel. Just get to the end, she told herself. The wind’s coming from somewhere, so just get to the end.

But since when did wind sound like voices?

she’s here

just like rasmo promised!

she’ll fall she’ll fall she’ll fall

Logic said “no,” but Kutone’s Stardew Valley had thin laces of illogic hidden in its corners. The whispers caressed her skin and raised cold bumps and hairs down her neck and back. Ignore them. Just get to the end, get the prize, and get out. I’m not hearing anything, just wind through a tunnel, and the wind’s coming from outside, and outside is Spirits’ Eve. Her touch guided her around a corner, then another, down a small incline, and then, finally, a splash of moonlight on autumn foliage. Slipping on loose scree, Kutone scrambled out, brushing past the low branches obscuring the tunnel’s exit.

Cool night air, open and sweet, filled her lungs, as the cheers of ongoing festivities brought her back from the wind’s myriad whispers. Hedges surrounded her on three sides, and a thick black panel cushioned her sneakered steps. She sauntered past the gleaming chest in the middle of the panel, and stopped at the southernmost wall. Beyond it, Alex muttered and cursed and rustled around the leaves. “How thick is this damn thing? Can’t even feel the other side!”

He’d sworn he could find a trick door or hidden shortcut, when she and Sam had last passed him. “You were almost right,” Kutone snickered. “Try the west side, Alex, past the fountain.”

Silence. Alex sifted around the hedge for a few moments longer. After a sigh, his steps faded away.

Strange. Alex wasn’t a sore loser.

Then came a hurried patter of steps. They stopped at the wall.

“She’s nowhere in here, Sam!” Abigail panted. “We’ve been through this entire thing three times already, and no one’s seen her!”

“They’re just—they’re just trying to psych us out!” Desperation made Sam’s voice almost an octave higher. “They’re all in on the same joke, and Kutone’s somewhere in here—gotta be! Kutone!”

“Dumbo, shut up! If someone hears and the whole town finds out, that’s exactly the same as telling Seb she’s missing!”

Missing? Hardly. Kutone grabbed fistfuls of hedge, boring a hole for her voice to filter through. “Hey, I’m still in the maze! At the end!”

“Oh, Yoba above!” swore Sam, “How am I supposed to get people’s help, if people are just gonna blab about it?!”

“We have to find her ourselves!”
Their panicked voices were loud and clear through the hedge—Kutone could reach through the bramble and touch them, if she wanted to scare them that badly, but for some reason… “Hey! Sam?”
For some reason… “Abigail?”

“You know that sounds exactly like your usual let’s go on an adventure speech, right?”

“That’s not what I mean! I’m just as worried about Kutone, you know, and if Seb finds out, well… They only just got together.”

“Then do we tear down the hedges to look for her?! Community service can only get me so far!”

“You know that’s always been impossible to do; these bushes are thicker than Alex’s arms!”

They were just ignoring her, right? They heard her, but they chose to pretend they didn’t, because Spirits’ Eve also celebrated the pranksters of the world. Pelican Town could always count on Sam to pull off some elaborate joke, but this went too far for Kutone’s taste. “Sam! Abigail! I’m on the other side!”

Kutone plunged her hand and arm into the hedge, but just as Alex had observed, she only felt more branches and leaves. She tried standing on her toes, reaching in deeper, but still the bramble poked at her skin. “I’m right here!”

“Come on,” Abigail resigned, “we’ll comb through where you saw her disappear. Cover my eyes at the spiders!”

Their hurried steps went away. Yanking her hand out, Kutone followed as far as she could. “Hey, guys! I’m at the end of the maze! There’s a chest here and the floor’s pitch-black! Hey!”

She ran into the corner as Sam and Abigail dashed back the way they came.

*they can’t hear you*

Her own voice? A child’s voice? Not the wind this time. Kutone whirled around, eyes stopping at every empty corner of the maze’s end. Nothing. Nothing. No one. She took one step forward—and then the eyes.

The eyes glimmered open beneath her.

Wide eyes, blinking eyes, squinting eyes, in red, purple, green, all alight, followed her as she scrabbled back against the corner. “Guys?” she squeaked, her voice faint. “Sam! Abigail! I’m at the end of the maze, and I’m freaking—help!”

Bulbous eyes bulged out of the tile and rolled in place toward her. Slits carved into the black and curved into jack-o-lantern grins, then widened, opened, and screeching titters spilled out. Kutone pressed her hands to her ears, squeezed her eyes shut, and curled into the corner, shivering, but the voices went on.

*look she can hear us feel us smell us see us*

*and we were always always here*

*here within silly adept empty adept*

*unspecial human she hears us louder*

*we should take her*

*yes take her*
Like a blanket over a microphone, the voices blotted out. She eased her eyes open. The tile remained still. The wind, absent. She crawled to her feet and wrapped her arms around herself. The chill—the kind of frost that pierced straight into the spine, and crept up like vines before seizing the voice and skull and sight—had that always been in the air?

She stepped once. Something moved.

She stepped again. Something split.

She looked down. Cracks splintered from below her heels. The eyes, globules of writhing ooze, opened again.

Her voice seized. The tile shattered. Her body crumpled onto solid ground above her, but Kutone fell deeper.

She stretched her hand up toward her crumpled body, before slimy shadows clamped their hands around her mouth, her ears, her eyes, wrists, ankles, and dragged her below. Squirming, twitching, pulsating in the darkness of the long pit, they shrouded her body in shadows, and then—only then—did they finally let her go. She plummeted past hisses, slithers, and more gleeful laughs, as eyes opened in faces and shapes she only dreamed of—ran away from—in her nightmares. Splitting grins opened and lunged at her, but with her own hands clamped against her nose and mouth, Kutone failed to scream. Tears beaded at the corners of her eyes, her skin cold, and her heart thundered against her ribcage. Yet they heard her desperate, shallow breaths.

she’s here

she’s falling

is she delicious is she ready
give me her hair i want her hair her hair like grape licorice

Above her, something tore through the pulsing walls of shadows. Screams pierced through the black, followed by incinerating flares roasting the hands and faces groping at her. Fire lit the shadows for one moment, and a long pair golden tendrils sprouting from a scaly green maw opening wide over her—

the serpent

the serpent!!

Fire burst in brilliant radiance. The jaws snapped shut over her.

She woke to grit and cold stone digging into her cheek. A low wind stirred more dust, as Kutone dragged herself first to her knees. Pain seared down her arm and leg, and as her bleary vision refocused, she noted the tattered remains of her sweater’s right sleeve, alongside bright red marks that screamed against the night air. Avoiding further irritation of the burns, she staggered to her feet and inspected her surroundings.

Deep black clouded the sky above her, but faint light from the square’s posts gave, at least, a dead pallor to Pelican Town. Nothing stirred, except for the wind, and no other lights glowed through the
windows—not at Harvey’s, not at Pierre’s, not even the Saloon. None of the Spirits’ Eve decorations, the table, the pumpkins, the cornucopia, and all the hay bales, remained either.

Had she slept through a few days?

She took a loud, echoing step forward, jumping at her own sound. Licking her dried lips, she called out into the darkened town. “Hello?”

Her voice echoed into the gray. She took another step, then another. “Anybody here?”

Dead silence and her own voice returned the greetings. Her heart raced again. “Lewis? Sam? If this is some sick joke—you win. You got me. Really well.”

Her voice faltered under her own echo. Steps ringing loudly again, Kutone dragged herself toward the Stardrop Saloon. If anyone knew anything, it would be someone—Gus, or Emily, maybe—at the saloon.

The door’s latch clicked and jammed, no matter how many times she jiggled it back and forth. Closing time already? Kutone brought up her wrist to find, dismayed, her watch shattered, hands jerking in place. Not even shaking her wrist revived it.

Defeated, she stepped away from the Saloon, her jarring steps shooting painful trembles from her entire right side. Maybe, she thought, she could start with some of Harvey’s professional treatment. That serpent, with its fiery breath and writhing feelers, sulfuric breath and jaws over her—

She stopped dead in her tracks, and lifted her eyes from the ground. “It ate me,” she murmured, spinning in place. “So this is—am I—this isn’t the town. This isn’t the town!”

Squeaky laughter answered her realization, as tarry growths oozed from between the cracks of the cobblestone. The sickly sweet smell of smoke and cocktails greeted her like a haze in a lounge, but laced also with an undertone of that sulfuric burn—the Serpent. Covering her nose and mouth, Kutone gazed up at the sky, too focused on finding the gleam of green scales to notice the shadows wrapping around the hems of her pants. Only when she stepped forward, stumbled, twisted, and landed on her rear, did she finally see them: the masses from the pit, eyes aglow and inspecting her, every strand of hair, every pallid shade of her features, and possibly even her shallow breath as they leered over her.

what color is she inside?

is she grape like her hair or caramel like her skin?

we can see we can see soon rasmo told us so

The largest of the creatures, a bulbous, multi-legged, snake-like abomination, slithered over her, pressed her into the ground. Its gelatinous eyes stared into her wide, panicked gape, then shaking with mirth, the eyes withdrew into its body. It shivered, condensed, writhed, and then—

Then Kutone stared at herself—it had to be herself, she remembered the contours of her suit, the way she wore her hair, and though the creature had no colored features except for the glow of its eyes and ear-to-ear grin, it spoke in her voice. “Welcome home, Kutone,” its myriad voices gurgled like sound in water, “we have been waiting for you.”

With a heave of her good leg and nails splitting over the stone, Kutone scrabbled away to her feet, and without casting another look back, ran for her life. Her feet pelting into the ground, she veered around corners, and leaped over shrubs, stumbling on her own feet and scuffing her toes against the
cobble. Indeterminate screeches, wayward gusts of wind, cackles, and the weight of something reaching out and almost touching her neck with the curved hook of a claw—all the components to a nightmare parade, and Kutone led it blundering through the deserted town.

They crashed through brush, and trees snapped in their thunderous rampage after her, as she blindly ran past the shadowed community center, and up the mountain slope, skidding and kiting around the shadows snapping at her ankles. She ducked under the claws razing over her head, just as a stitch knotted in her side, throbbing with her burns and bruises. A safe spot, her mind fizzled. Find a safe place…

Breath ragged, pace slowing, she pressed her free arm to her side as she staggered further up the mountain.

*she’s stopping*

*we can open the void we can be free*

*like grape like caramel like coffee like wine*

Darkness needled around her like a thick wreath. She stopped, her heaving breaths too shallow for any air to filter through her body. Her legs shook, protesting the abuse they’d suffered since falling so far.

She was almost down to her knees, but then, a single light shined ahead. Even the shadows slowed behind her, as Kutone lifted her head again. Robin’s house, she determined. A friend. A safe place.

*no*

And there, in that same safe place…

*she can’t*

*don’t let her*

“Sebastian?”

*don’t let her don’t let her DON’T LET HER*

With the keening swelling behind her, Kutone burst forward again, racing through the clearing and slamming the door open. Gelatinous voices screamed behind her, crashing into the door frame and the far wall by Robin’s front desk, as Kutone grabbed the corner and sling-shot herself down the basement stairs. She cleared the steps with one great leap, a triumphant yelp squeaking out of her throat as she reached for the doorknob.

“Oh no, Kutone, not yet…”

The door, with light shining from the crack underneath, suddenly drew miles away. The steps disappeared, shattering into a rain of glass.

She fell again, tumbling in mid-air, her own synthetic gurgles following her down.

She slammed onto sand, rolled, and finally stopped with her legs halfway under a tideline, and her body pulsing back and forth between icy hot flares of aches. Sand ground into the burns down her arm and the scrapes along her face, but all Kutone could manage was a laborious roll onto her back.
She pursed her lips and groaned—fuck, *everything* hurt—but at least only the stars above, in nebulous, twinkling clouds of violet and blue, stared down at her, instead of the mayhem back in town.

Her watch still broken, she had no way to tell how long she lay there, but the tideline crept higher and higher up the shore. At her calves just before, the sea, inky black yet glittering, pushed and pulled over her thighs and crept up her back. If only it would carry her away.

“I’d hoped to find you in better condition, young adept.”

*Of course* the wizard had something to do with this chaotic mess. Kutone groaned, but even as Rasmodius leaned over her, she refused to move. The icy water numbed the pain. Washed it away.

With a snort, the wizard nodded. “Very well then. I will caution you when the water level threatens to drown you.”

“Tell me this is all an elaborate prank,” Kutone croaked, “and I’ll forgive you for letting me drown here.”

The tide rippled around them, and somewhere down the shore, it crashed in a spray of brine and foam. The wizard held his hat against the ocean wind. “Shan’t,” he replied. “For it is no prank, and I can’t let you drown here of all places.”

“Consider me excited to find out what hellhole you dropped me into.”

“I will admit,” began the wizard, drawling as he pondered his words, “I construct the maze annually, for the sake of the spirits curious about the mundane folk. This year in particular, you were the centerpiece of many inquisitive spirits. Your interactions with the Junimos have not gone unnoticed, after all.”

Were Rasmodius expecting an answer, Kutone decided against regaling him with her conversation. She could sleep here—the sand cradled her with homely warmth, she realized, and cool waters of the sea, undulating over her, made a strangely comforting blanket. She closed her eyes. Sleep sounded so good.

At least, until Rasmodius huffed his indignance. “Adept, do you not understand your own surroundings?”

Kutone, opening her eyes, cast a baleful glare toward the wizard. Then heaving an aggravated groan, she looked up, then across the water. “The beach,” she stated. “It’s night. My entire body hurts, Wizard, so forgive me for not being in the mood for your lectures at the moment.”

“Forgiven.” The wizard stroked his beard, then thoughtfully continued. “A night sky and a seascape. And if you follow this dune back up, you’ll find yourself at the edges of a great forest. Perhaps that sounds familiar to you?”

“Like a goddamn painting I don’t remember seeing.”

“Wrong. And you are about to drown.”

She eased herself up from the tideline edging dangerously up her chest. After a struggling splash, Kutone stood on her feet, leaning into the sandy hill. “Straight to the point, Rasmodius,” Kutone demanded. “Where am I?”

The tide suddenly rushed in, but instead of buffeting both wizard and Kutone off their feet, starlight
cast its gleam, propping them on top of two discs of unearthly light. Without a word, the wizard stepped forward, unflinching at the concept of walking on water. Kutone followed, as the sky and sea merged behind them, leaving them on a neverending expanse of mirrored sky.

Rasmodius spread his arms from under his cloak. “Welcome,” he said, “to your heart.” He lowered his arms, and disregarding Kutone’s boggled stare, continued his leisurely walk along starlit ocean. “Forest, which we imbued within you, lies behind us. Sea, beneath us.” Stopping mid-step, he turned to Kutone. “Supporting us, with starlight, and giving permanence to this entire dimension, despite its natural state of lacking permanence—Void.” He narrowed his eyes. “Kutone, behind you.”

She turned around as well, ready to snap back with her barbed tongue, but the swirling cloud of pitch black in the sky, pulling in the nearby stars and allowing no light to escape, choked her snark. She watched with wide eyes and open mouth.

“I warned you once before, beware the Void that consumes you from within. No one—at least, no human—can survive long while on the support of Void, and you, young adept, are within its pull.”

Kutone spun back around. “Those shadows—the slimy things with eyes—they said something about—about me opening the void.”

“Oh.” Rasmodius watched the swirling black, and stroked his beard again. “I see. Intriguing. Concerning.” He squinted hard, and then, with an understanding, yet exhausted groan, squared his shoulders. “Yes, this would explain their violent behavior.”

She stared at him, hoping her undivided attention would eke out a straightforward explanation.

“Consider this happenstance a trial, my friend,” said the wizard. “Unfortunately, you haven’t much time to overcome it. That,” He nodded toward the sky, “is the beginning of a physical Void Essence. As it eats you from inside, it has begun crystallizing.”

That’s why the shape looked so familiar. “So. What happens, if it ‘crystallizes?’”

“Believe me when I say you don’t want to know. You, however, seem to have had some help in keeping this process under control.”

As Kutone threw the wizard a questioning glance, Rasmodius stepped back, and with a wave of his hand, followed by a luminous cloud of light, a body floated in front of him. A young man’s body, asleep, yet still clad in his usual dark clothes.

“Sebastian?”

“I promise you, this is not the same boy you know. But!” Rasmodius held up his free palm to stop Kutone from crashing into the sleeping Sebastian. “Remain cautious! Remember that this is the realm of the dreaming heart, and the boy has—for lack of a better explanation—barely survived his own trials.”

Upon closer inspection, a ghostly glow radiated from Sebastian’s pallid skin, like porcelain under a bright light. His expression fluctuated between different levels of troubled sleep, and as he turned his head, thin lines glimmered across his face and down his neck. Cracks, Kutone realized with a start, and in comparison to the rest of his body, his limbs lacked permanence. She pressed a hand to her mouth, afraid her breath would inadvertently shatter him.

“Humans are strange creatures indeed,” the wizard went on. “Here we have a young man nearly broken himself, and he’s risked his own permanence for the sake of yours.” He eyed Kutone from under the brim of his hat. “I applaud his valiance, yet without proper tutelage, his efforts are, sadly,
Kutone kept her voice low, and her hand over her mouth, as she eyed the wizard again. “What happens, if this—this image, breaks?”

“I imagine you’ll have a complete Void Essence congeal within you, opening the gateway to even more wrathful spirits flooding the valley. Not that the villagers will notice, but you—you may not recover.”

“Forget what happens to me! What happens to him?”

“He’ll disappear. Interpret that as you will.”

Disappear? Physically, from the valley? Or something even graver? Kutone pulled her hand away from her lips, as understanding settled over her racing doubt. “It’ll be my fault,” she whispered. “I’m going to break him?”

“Perhaps so.”

Again, huh? Fucking, again. She staggered back, and sunk to her knees. Tears strained against the corners of her eyes, but she ground her knuckles against her eyeballs. She gritted her teeth against not sadness, but a boiling, restrained scream at herself. How many people would she keep hurting? How dare she call this sweet, innocent boy her significant other, when her own corruption threatened to now break him in this mad-as-high-balls space of her heart? And why—why did he invest so much of himself in her, without even knowing the full details of her story? Why risk this mess—and screw the fact it was a subconscious mess!—when, truthfully, he knew next to nothing about her?

She could have wondered and cried longer, but an answer lurched forward into her consciousness. A proper answer, she agreed. A solid No. We’re not going to sit here and cry about this. An answer that deserved a proper voice. “I’m not…I won’t let this happen to him,” she growled. She peeled her hands away from her wet eyes. “Not without him knowing me.”

Rasmodius raised a bemused brow, and with a smirk, waved his hand again. Sebastian disappeared in the same cloud of light, as Kutone stood up. “The question then, is a matter of your will.” With a flourish of his cloak, the wizard stalked away from the whirling void in the sky, Kutone behind him. “The heart is a labyrinth, my friend,” he mused. “And the spirits, in their budding hostility, have dragged you very far from the center of this labyrinth.”

Dragged away—that door, Kutone conceded. That door to the basement, with the light pouring from underneath. “I have to find it again,” she said, “to get out of here.”

“Precisely. There should be a door, or a bridge—something to help you cross over from here and back to yourself. Find it, and remember you don’t have long.”

Rasmodius pointed up toward the sky, where, muffled voices filtered through.

_Holy shit, Kutone—Kutone! Sam, Abigail, she’s here! I can see her!_

_Fucking—thank Yoba—but how’re we gonna get to her? We gotta get her out!_

_Alex, you can throw us over this hedge, can’t you?_

_I’m always up for a challenge, but how would you get back?_

_Abby—holy shit, Abby—she’s not moving. I can see her through this hole, and I repeat, she’s not_
*moving.*

Alright. Alright, don’t panic—what do we do?

*Harvey’s in the labyrinth somewhere. Someone go get him—I’ll try to rip through this hedge.*

*I’ll—I got that. I’ll go get the Doc—Abby, stay here with Alex! I’ll be back!*

*Kutone! Kutone, we’re getting help for you! Hang in there!*

“Spirits’ Eve has ended,” said the wizard, “and my ward on the hedges have thus expired. Your body is safe where it belongs, but should your spirit remain trapped here…”

“The Void eats me up,” Kutone replied. “I think I understand now.”

“And eventually, your Sebastian will find you in your deep sleep. It cannot be avoided. Should his hope diminish before you find the center of this labyrinth—well, you’ve observed his current state.”

“Yeah. Pretty simple.” She started on a brisk walk, passing Rasmodius as she pressed her free hand against her side again. “Thanks for the lectures. I’ll see you on the other side?”

The wizard tipped his brim over his eyes. “If your will guides you correctly.”

Chapter End Notes

...I used to write fantasy adventure stories. And I play way too many video games.

Find me at my [tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com) if you wanna chat!

And, as always, thank you all so, so much for all of your comments, kudos, and bookmarks! Thanks to you guys, I might not have to take as long of a break! Thank you!
A star shoots across the mirrored sky—probably the wizard; I’ve seen him do something similar, once upon a spring. He disappears into the distant night, tinged a malevolent violet in spite of the stars—the fakes. Because the stars here look more like city lights from a mountaintop, and I call them “fakes” after hearing someone else say the same thing. The word fits, since city lights tend to usurp the sky from the stars, but in doing so, the lights somehow flip the entire world.

Behind me, that oscillating current drags across the sky, across the reflecting sea, and picks up droplets from beneath my feet.

It’s not powerful enough to take me, yet.

I have to get out of here before it gains that power. So which way do I go? The sea, still supporting my steps on the rippling surface, stretches toward and meets the horizon, and the fakes have no rhyme or reason, no cardinal directions to guide me.

Think. The only direction I can’t go is back.

So straight ahead. That’s where I’ll go.

Each step throbs a pulsing ache through my entire side—it’s especially bad at my hip and shoulder, even with both hands pressed to each joint. I’ve done a lot of falling today.

The tattered fringes of my sweater, once a dark orange argyle burned brown, black, and curled, brush against the tender red marks up my arm, and the sand’s not helping either. Stinging, aching, bruised, I wish the water below me was cold and fresh, instead of solid and salty.

Keep going.

My steps echo into the void. Kind of blends with the perpetual drone of the wind. My heels and soles hurt.

How long have I been walking? The hole in the sky hasn’t receded into the distance. I need to get out, hopefully before Sam and Abigail get back to my body with Harvey, and especially before the rest of the town, before Sebastian, finds out something’s gone wrong.

But really? Would Sebastian really shatter because I’m comatose? He’s more realistic—logical—than people credit him, and distant enough from his emotions that, he knows I can take care of myself. He knows I navigate the mines behind his house, and he knows that, even though I’m not nearly as experienced as Marlon and Gil from the Adventurers’ Guild, I always come back alive. I promised him that much, at least.

I promised…

Sebastian made me promise. He never speaks emphatically, so he sounded as nonchalant as usual when we had that conversation. Not that bothered, I thought, but he wouldn’t look at me. He frowned, he fidgeted, and he sighed a lot, even as I told him I’d be okay.

Maybe he was extremely worried about me going into the mines, and I read him totally wrong.
I really am the worst at this “significant other” role.

“We certainly warned him about that. And yet, he chose you.”

Behind me.

It’s like someone’s playing a recording of my voice underwater. Synthetic, mocking, but not utterly hateful, she—that shadow of me—stands behind me with hands on her hips. Her entire image swims in tendrils of murk, but in the brief moments she settles, her golden snake eyes pierce through the night, and her conniving grin glimmers faintly with barely-hidden snake teeth. The eyes in the dark called her The Serpent, but she’s less snake-like. More like me. Still insidious, still monstrous in appearance, but the shape of her body, the shadows surrounding her, hurries to fill in a vague shape of me.

Her face hides behind cloudy black again, but her voice is still mine. “Kutone,” she hisses, “how about we make a deal?”

“Depends on the offer.”

Her hair rolls and puffs like smoke, as she narrows her eyes. “I offer the exit from this warped dimension.”

“In return?”

She presses a clawed hand against her chest. “Open the void and let me out.” Her grin widens and glows brighter. “I promise I’ll take good care of the boy—I can teach him all the dirty things we know.”

“We’re done here.”

I start walking away, but a quick slither has her leering down at me. “You drive a cruel bargain on such a fragile heart like him. At least under my tutelage, he’ll be more prepared for you.”

Prepared? My mind has no idea what she’s insinuating, but the blood in my body runs cold. I’m speaking before I understand—“I’m different now.”

She coils around me and sinks her cold hands into my shoulders. “Are you really? Are you saying you didn’t enjoy breaking those poor souls, filling yourself with their sadness? I wonder how his will be…”

“I’m over it.”

She shakes with hidden cackles. “Oh the things you did to them, Kutone. You enjoyed every moment of it, and you look forward to pushing the boy as far as you can, before you shatter him with your own hands. You know how to make a body drown in you, how to leave your name on their tongues like a drugged stain—or did you forget that?”

No, I haven’t. In fact, her words kindle the old embers of memories I’m trying to smother, but as she bears down on me with her alluring hiss, the embers morph into neon lights, and her voice becomes smoke, and she exudes the sharp, acidic scent of too much alcohol, and I’m pressing my hands to my head and promising myself, promising Sebastian, that I’ll never do it again, I can’t do it again, not to his precious heart, not after everyone else I’ve already broken—I can’t!

“Such a shame.”
There’s a hard push against my chest, hard enough to choke my scream as I fall again.

Phones ring, like droning knells, from cubicles down the corridor. Mine rings too. Mine? Yes. Yes, this is my desk, on some high floor still below the highest, my mahogany desk big enough for me lie across and sleep. There’s a desk calendar on the corner but it’s totally blank, and stacks of papers and folders arranged in a neat fan across the polished desk.

My desk.

It’s cool underneath my fingertips, and hums slightly against the whir of the hard drive below. My chair’s turned, like I recently left it, probably to use the bathroom.

Use the bathroom. To change. I have to go change. That’s why I left my desk.

Someone left a paper bag on the middle of my desk. It’s a designer bag, from that boutique where I got my suit—my suit and my shoes are in the bag. I wonder if Rhei brought it with him when he came in today. He knows I can’t wake up in the morning.

He’s frosted the windows to his office, but I can see his silhouette pacing back and forth. He does that when he’s in the middle of a difficult transition. He’ll want something strong later—wine won’t cut it. Espresso with whiskey? His go-to drink after a hard day. At home. At my place.

But first, I have to change. The ladies in their pastel blazers and suits stare at me from around the corner, and shake their heads at my sweater and jeans. That makes sense. I’m not in appropriate work attire.

I’m still half asleep.

I change there, in the middle of the corridor. Argyle sweater and collared undershirt, off. White blouse and black pinstripe blazer, on. Jeans, off. Pinstripe slacks, on. Sneakers, in the trash. Pumps, on. The twin tails have to go. I twist my hair into a single thick curl over my shoulder.

Rhei opens his door as I finish changing. He gives me his crooked smile, that one he forces when he’s in trouble. “Caramel.” His voice has too much of an echoing hiss. Is he sick? “Come on, I need your help.”

“That difficult, is it?”

“You know it.”

He props the door open with his foot, and offers me my tablet as I stagger toward him. For some reason—and I know the reason but my thoughts are so far away—my whole body hurts. My fingertips sting and throb as I take my tablet from him. He presses a tight grip onto my upper arm, and drags me inside his office. The fade and swell of his voice goes on about the difficult client, like a spotty radio broadcast.

The scar’s missing from his brow. This is the Rhei from two and a half years ago, the Rhei who mentored me through undergrad and wrote my letter of recommendation, the Rhei who slipped deep into me, filled me, over and over again until his body gave out, the Rhei who used my spare key every night to sneak into my apartment and love me as madly as the night before. It’s so nice to see him so happy, so alive, like a snapshot from the moment before we broke each other. He catches me staring at the fringes of his dark hair framing his face, and touches his thumb to my lips.
“Caramel,” Rhei breathes, “don’t make me kiss you.”

He’s not…

He’s not entirely at fault. I remember that.

He caresses my bottom lip. He leans in.

“Rhei.” I press my hand against his chest, stopping him. “I’m sorry.”

“For?”

I open my mouth. I want to tell him, the same way I did before, but I can’t say it. I just can’t. But I have to. I owe Rhei that much, and if I ever plan to tell Sebastian, I have to come clean. We broke each other. That’s the truth.

“I cheated—I cheated…”

He drags his thumb along my bottom lip, down my chin, and presses. “That’s okay. You can stay here, with me, until you’re able to say it.”

A hard press. It’s forceful. Too forceful. This is a different Rhei. I slap his hand away, stumble, and twist my ankles in my heels and collapse at the door.

This is a different Rhei. A Rhei that should have been, when I—

The intercom on his office phone blares one monotonous beep. A flicker lights in “Rhei”’s eyes, as he turns away from me and stalks toward his desk. He doesn’t get there in time.

Kutone?

Kutone, we got the doctor for you!

Come on, Kutone, snap out of it!

Abigail, Sam, Alex. Their voices break and fizz over the intercom, but they’re enough to blast cracks through the windows and walls of the company building.

Doc, she’s still alive, isn’t she?

Pulse and breath are stable, yes…

Oh no, Yoba above, you have to sound more sure about that kind of thing!

I’m just asleep. I wonder how long Harvey will take to figure that out. Not long, I think, if I’m sleeping normally. Maybe I’m not.

“Caramel.”

Rhei, hair and suit dark like shadows, and eyes glowing, watches me from the corners of his eyes. Though he keeps his hands deep in his pockets, the ridges of his knuckles bulge through the fabric. This is the Rhei that should have been.

“You still remember, huh?”

“I—I’m sorry.”
“And you live with it, every day.”

“I do.”

“That’s the type of woman you are.”

“Yeah. Yeah—I—I am.”

A fuzzy blackness creeps along the cracks. The floor shatters beneath me. Rhei disappears into a wisp of black mist.

At the edge of the hole above, a shadow watches with a frown. It’s shorter than the others, and the white glow of its eyes remind me of the stars above the mountain lake. A curl above its head bounces as it retreats.

I’m not sure I’ll ever wake up.

Where am I going next?

If anyone’s talking to me, I’m sorry. The wind whines too loudly here. And my stomach’s caught in a perpetual drift, like it’ll never settle, and I’ll never find solid ground again.

I’m starting to think, maybe it’s better that I don’t.

Lines shoot through the black past me as neon auras wrap around them. They swerve and curl into letters and signs and outlines of buildings, but they all point down, straight down. I follow the lights down into the dark. Golden eyes watch me from some point high above me, wherever up happens to be. Even when I close my eyes, the neons continue trailing down. I’m rolling and drifting through the dark, as wind rushes around me, through me.

I know where I’m going.

The tunnel turns, the buildings upright. I turn with the scenery, and land on pavement. My body’s spared a hard landing this time, but my memories get a hard kick, with the smell of soured piss and old cigarettes. Rain runs down the walls, turning the bricks a slimy sheen, and floods the dip in the alley into a shallow river.

This is more of a matter of when, rather than where. I know when I am. I don’t want to keep moving forward.

I’m still in my suit, but somewhere along that drop, my heels broke. My blouse’s torn. And I think I’m missing a button from my blazer. Dried blood cakes the edges of my fingernails, and my side creaks and tingles against every movement. My body, at least, remembers the abuse it’s suffered so far.

I kick off my heels and keep walking, barefoot, through the slime. Hobbling, really. Rain water splashes onto the hems of my pants, and soaks me through my hair and shoulders. This is the episode after I left that scar on Rhei’s brow. The rain, the alleyway, the wish to tear out the eyes of the next person to look at me, and yet for someone to cradle my body the way Rhei used to—

“Miss Toné?”

I don’t remember the face that belongs to that voice, nor the name. But like that time, I turn toward it.
“Miss Toné! Have you been crying?”

His name’s totally lost to me. But that’s okay—this is a matter of when.

It’s 12:37 AM. After I left the last of my projects with Rhei, I started walking home, hopping from bar to bar. Thirty-seven minutes in to my meandering, I slipped on vomit or piss or something, landed in the rainy alleyway, and just sat there. I don’t remember crying, but I know I stopped feeling. Everything became a mad prickle at the corners of my eyes, the surface of my cheeks, a buzz in my stomach.

The boy is in IT. Or accounting. It doesn’t really matter. He says he knows me from university, from a business management class we took together. He calls me Toné because it matches my image. His voice is higher than Rhei’s, sweeter, and his touch, as he pulls me upright, is the type of gentleness reserved for fragile china.

I say something to him. His name, I think, and the shape of a smile glows in his features. “I heard the rumors,” the boy whispers, arms already around my waist. “Young had no right to abandon you like that—you did the right thing, leaving him, Toné.”

It’s 12:48 AM. He kisses me. His hands drag over my ruined blazer and under my blouse. He says my name and tastes like mint lip balm. He says he’s always looked up to me, always wanted to be more than friends, but never had the courage to speak up.

I want his body.

It’s 12:49 AM. He kisses the crook of my neck. His hands trail up my sides, behind my back, and his fingers trace the clasp of my bra. He says he can love me for who I am, not for what I can do. He says Rhei used me to get higher in the company.

I press my hand against his crotch. He grabs my wrist and slides my fingers down, cups my palm against him, grinds hard into my touch. He tries to my say my name, but he’s out of breath.

It’s 12:52 AM. He’s hard under my stroking hand. He’s ready. He can help me forget. He can help me break Rhei.

Then, it’s 2:33 AM. My apartment. Used and tied condoms litter the floor around us. He’s still hard, but he doesn’t fill me like Rhei used to. So says my mind, but my body’s euphoric, taking the new boy’s every deep thrust with an intoxicated shudder. Between his groans, a numbing rush dulls my nerves. I’m forgetting what part of me died when I made Rhei bleed.

We’re on the sofa, the same sofa Rhei and I made love before. Sweat and sex binds us together—whoever this is, his body feels so good inside me. He likes my breasts—soft and perky and full, Toné, you taste so fucking good—and as he thrusts up into me, the floor creaks under the sofa.

There’s another creak: the click of an opened lock, the squeak of the front door. Light from the apartment hallway illuminates the wet sheen on the boy’s skin, but he doesn’t stop. At least, not until Rhei drops his briefcase.

Rhei’s voice breaks. He’s trying to breathe, but sucking air in, I think, stings his throat. “What—what is—who is—Kutone?!?”

The boy from IT—or accounting—yanks himself out. The tingle of an unfinished fuck, Rhei’s shattered expression—I just wanted to talk, but, why?! Kutone, why?!—and the boy’s helplessly heaving breaths: they all make me forget.
They make me powerful.

Their shattered expressions mirror Rhei’s too well. They submit, they insist that the bonds between two bodies proves their emotional connection, and I simply devour that innocence. I have the power to make them face reality. Nothing better than heartbreak.

After I lost everything I gained with Rhei, I found my own way to conquer that building from the bottom up. That’s how I made pants look sexy, how I owned my new nickname, because hell to anyone caught me crying about this. After all, Rhei wasn’t what I wanted back.

I wanted me back.

I’m standing in shadows again, this time, totally naked. Hair down and swimming like an image I’ve seen before. Skin glowing in mottled colors, patterned after the myriad touches people have left on my body over the years. Dragged finger marks down my thighs. Hickeys and kisses and licks around my neck, like an inset necklace. Bite marks dotting my breasts. And handprints, everywhere, from head to toe—even my hair glows different colors. It’s an ugly mottle, like vomit stains on pavement.

The clicks of heels echo through the black. I’m not afraid of me anymore, as she stands in front of me with a sneer. She’s tall, voluptuous, golden eyes half-lidded. Her hair fluffs in stylized curls over one of her shoulders, and exposes one side of her neck. Her voice remains snake-like.

“You’ve fallen so far into yourself.”

I did. I don’t think I can get out.

Like she hears my thoughts, she sneers wider. She points up.

*Seb, breathe for just a sec! She’s okay!*

*Harvey says so, that she’s just sleeping!*

*But no one knows why, right?*

I’ve never heard Sebastian so weak. Whatever pieces are left of him are shuddering in place—he’s barely holding himself together.

*Let me see her. Please.*

*Sebby, maybe we should let Harvey and Maru keep taking care of her—*

*Please.*

I get it now. I was too nonchalant about this entire escapade. I took his feelings for granted. I didn’t think he’d worry, but he sounds so broken. And now I can’t get out. There’s no path forward for me to follow, except the mirror image of me I owned and created over those two years, but I can’t let that version of me out anymore! I’m not that person anymore, and I’ll come clean about myself, I swear!

Her lips curl into a grin. “If you tell Sebastian what you did to Rhei, to all those people you worked with, what do you think will happen?”

I will taint him. I will lose his trust. I’ll lose him.
“If you leave things to me, I’ll make sure he never finds out. He’ll drown in me, and he’ll never know your secrets. I’ll keep him blind to your filthiness, your selfishness, but you have to let me out.”

I can protect him. I can keep him, just the way he is, the way I like him.

She steps back, heels echoing. “I’ll make him happy. Bet on that.”

I let her go.

And so, I am the worst.

I told Alex that, when he gave me Rhei’s desperately lovestruck expression, and I barely managed to keep him away. I told Sebastian the same thing, when I turned to Rhei one last time, for closure. Sebastian bit me back with bitterness, but he came back the next night and tumbled over his words: *I like you a lot.*

I let her go because I needed to stop Sebastian, and his feelings. It’s only a matter of time before I break him, but I can save him from me. He deserves so much better than what I can give him.

Still black all around. I’m still such a nasty pattern of stains. And I wonder how long it’s been since I fell asleep up there. I wonder if the Void’s crystallized yet. I wonder if she’s out there now, and what kinds of webs she’s woven in my name.

“She can’t break the last wall.”

A pair of white eyes, along with a slight frown, glimmers through the dark. It totters into view, and cocks its head to one side. A single curlicue on top of its head bobs with its movement. It’s a Void Spirit, but peaceful and almost child-like.

Its eyes flicker and toddles closer. It leans its face into mine. “You’re not going to ask about the wall?”

“It sounds like I should. So…”

The spirit nods its head and gazes up. “That wall.”

Voices permeate through the murk, muffled but still audible.

*Sebby, here—try to eat something.*

*Thanks, but, I’m not hungry.*

*Honey, it’s been almost three days. I’m worried about Kutone too, but you’ve got to take care of yourself.*

*I know, Mom. I do. I just can’t. Not right now.*

I wonder why I haven’t heard anything this entire time. Three days, huh? And Sebastian’s been at my bedside that entire time?

I don’t get it.

I don’t get his feelings.

I understand his worry, but I don’t get why.
Try to come home tonight?

If she wakes up.

At least try not to smoke through another whole box in one day?

Can’t promise that.

...Fine. I’ll ask Maru to bring you a change of clothes before Harvey closes up.

Thanks.

He’s on the other side, waiting for me. “Sebastian’s the wall she can’t break?”

“Everyone in here thought he’d break very quickly, but he hasn’t.”

“Why are you so sure?”

The spirit nods up again.

Kutone.

His voice is clear, in my ear, like he’s right here with me. I say his name, but I know he doesn’t hear me. Yet, warmth embraces me, at the same time as the smell of tobacco, stronger than usual, and linen, not as fresh as the last time he held me close.

Kutone, if you leave me, I literally have nothing left in this place.

And if I lose him, I’m not sure I can cope anymore. His gentleness softens the edges and precipices of my anger. His care opens the grated prison door into myself, and lets me free. His affection dilutes my hatred, of Rhei, of Jaci, of the people I broke. His purity washes away my filth, and shines the facets I hid away.

With Sebastian, I want to be better.

I’m crying. I’m not sure when I started, but I can’t stop. The Void Spirit potters close, and nestles itself against my shoulder. Surprisingly, it’s warm, like embers from a recent flame. “I want to be better,” I sob. “For his sake, for my sake—I want to be better.”

It’s not a matter of why. It just is. I’m not sure when or how I’ll tell Sebastian more about me, but I have to. Better to lose him by telling him the truth, rather than keeping him with a lie. I wipe away my tears and bring myself to my feet. “I have to get out of here.”

The spirit stares at me with its glittering eyes, and finally curves its frown into a phantasmal grin. “Humans are strange,” it says. “They always find new ways forward, when they’re suffering the most.”

It gives me no time to ask, and hurries forward. In its wake, a path shines, as posts and guard rails sprout at the path’s borders. After a certain distance, the spirit stops and bounces in place. “I’m Krobus,” he proudly hums. “This way.”

Across the bridge and through the shadows, Krobus guides me, first into gray, then onto a dirt path. The grayness recedes into the sky above, while the path curves up like a mountain trail. Wind whispers through leaves, fading into view through the fog. Splinters and fallen trees litter some
patches of the path, along with deep gouge marks and scarring burns.

This is the path up the mountain. I ran through this before, when I first fell in. The only spirit here now is Krobus, and he seems more interested in this winding path, than me.

Krobus stops in the clearing. Ahead, stands the house, door flailing on its hinges. Next to the door, are the clothes I came into this place with. I pull them on one more time. The collared undershirt, the argyle sweater, the dark jeans, and the light shoes—they cover the ugly spatters of color across my body. That’s good. I don’t want Sebastian to see these marks quite yet.

My new Void Spirit friend follows me inside, and winces at the drag marks gouged across the woodwork of the house. “They were angry,” he says, leaning his stubby body in to examine a set of the scratches.

“Only because I was,” I say, because I get it now.

This place is me.

I descend the steps toward the basement. The door’s still closed, but the light’s still on and filters through the crack at the bottom. Strange, though. I wouldn’t call Sebastian my light—more like, my companion, my best friend, in the shadows and silence we occupy together. Maybe, eventually, we’ll come to see the light with the appreciation people expect us to have, but for now, I’m perfectly content with occupying the space I’m meant to be in. I think he is too.

I open the door.

She’s—I’m—standing in the middle of the room. Tall, sexy, and cool all at the same time, with the pinstripe lines of her suit accentuating the curves and contours of her body. Even as the heels of my shoes scrape against the wood floor, she stares hard at the sleeping boy on his bed.

“I could crush him with my heel,” she says. “Or, line up my fist with the cracks down his body, and shatter him into pieces. And he’d still be so beautiful.”

She raises her closed fist over him, but stops, mid-swing, when she looks at his face. “I want to break him,” she hisses. “I want to taint him, poison him; I want to make sure he knows the pipe dreams of his fantasies are just going to clog up with bullshit, and he’ll become like any other washed-up skank on the streets!”

“But you see that face,” I reply, “and you know you can’t do it.”

She pivots sharply on her heel. Sparks fly angrily across her golden eyes, and her movement whips the voluptuous curls of her hair into a seething mass. “What makes him different?” she spits. “After everyone you’ve broken—we’ve broken—why is this one so special?”

Maybe it’s because he’s a stranger to this demoness in me. He doesn’t know anything about the way I died in the city, the way I resuscitated myself with others’ shattered hearts. He still thinks that the fallout between me and Rhei is entirely Rhei’s fault. Or maybe he’s a little wiser than that, and suspects I had a hand in it too. Either way, he’s not for sure.

But I am. “Look at him.” Helplessly, she does so. “He’s quiet. Even though he must be hurting so badly, he has a certain grace to him, doesn’t he?”

She nods, her voice weak. “He’s amazing.”

“Maybe…” No, very likely. “Maybe, a part of me really does want to test his patience, to see if he’ll
still hold out for me after I tell him the truth. Maybe I do want to see him afraid of me, afraid of what I can do to him, given what I’ve done before. But I watch him in moments like this, and I feel so 
wrong.” We both watch him in his restless sleep, so ready to break and yet still steadfast. “I have problems. Trust issues. I made myself higher and more powerful by becoming you.

“You’re what I created to distract myself from this void.” It’s coming together. “You’re already out of the void—you’ve been out this entire time.”

I love the mask of melancholy the most. That’s how I attract them to me. “To a certain extent, it worked. Maybe you’re the reason why Sebastian decided to invest himself in me.” The angry swim of her hair settles. She tucks both of her hands under her arms and kneels on the floor. “But then, you heard the purity in his words, saw it and felt it when he kissed me everywhere except my lips—and that threw you off. No one’s given us that kind of respect.”

“Not even Rhei.”

“Not even Rhei.” I have to shrug. He still exasperates me, I guess. “And I invested a lot of myself in him.”

“And he ripped off a piece of you when he walked away.” Still cradling herself in her arms, she stares at the floor. “What’s to guarantee this one won’t do the same?”

“There isn’t. We humans are such temporary creatures, you know?”

“I know.”

But I’m starting to give credit where it’s due. Rhei at least came back and tried. I don’t mind the disgusting medley of human stains on my body as much. And then, in yet another instance, “He’s still waiting next to me, isn’t he?”

She looks up toward the ceiling for a moment, then turns her gaze back to him on the bed. “Yeah. He’s still there. I guess that’s another thing, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. It is.”

She wobbles to her feet, and slides out of her heels. Standing barefoot, she approaches sleeping Sebastian again. This time, she lays a gentle hand against his pallid cheek. “It’s true,” her whisper echoes, “There’s a grace, a purity, to the way he speaks to us, the way he holds our hand—and he fills me with something beautiful, without laying me naked before him.”

“Something beautiful,” I echo. “Something important.”

“Yes. Something important.” She takes her hand away, turns to me, and grips my shoulders like a vice. “I can’t let this one go!” she cries. “He does something amazing to me, something that stops me from breaking him, and I want you to feel the same!”

“I do. I want to protect him.”

“Protect him?” Her mouth curves around the words like a foreign food. She’s unfamiliar with the concept, but as she repeats it again, she nods in understanding. “We can start there. Yes.”

“Right. You’ll have to give me some time. But I’ll tell him about you—me.”

She flinches at the thought.
“I’m scared too. I don’t want to lose this feeling either. But at the same time, I feel like it can become something even better. Don’t you want that?”

She blinks, thinking. Then, her golden eyes glittering with tears, she nods, smiling.

Her grip relaxes. She embraces me instead. My vision starts spinning as she holds me tightly. Out of the corner of my eye, Krobus’s white jack-o-lantern grin cracks even wider, happily, reassuringly.

The world goes black, but white filters from above. My body lifts into the air, and I fall asleep.

First comes light, bright and sterile. Everything blurs into each other. A beep, mirroring my heartbeat, pulses through my clouded head. I try to blink, slowly, but nothing comes into focus. My mouth’s parched and ashy, but I take a deep breath through my nose and swallow. It almost gets caught in my throat, the rolling ache making me squirm.

My hand’s held in another clammy palm. As I blink again and turn my head, trying to sharpen my vision, he squeezes my hand.

“Kutone?”

His voice croaks. He hasn’t spoken in a while, I think. Against the bleary white, I can barely bring Sebastian’s features into focus. First his hair, dark, framing one side of his face. Then, his eyes, deep grey, but even darker by the circles shadowing his eyes. He looks awful. As I meet his gaze, relief pours out of him in one heavy breath. It gets some color back into his features.

He clasps both of his hands around mine. Kisses my knuckles and presses my fingers to his cheek, shockingly cold. “You can’t do this to me,” he mutters, trembling.

I try to my lick my lips, but my tongue does nothing but scrape against my chapped lips. “I’m sorry,” my voice crackles.

“Shut up,” he says. “No matter what you say to me right now, I won’t forgive you.”

“I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“I know you didn’t.”

Still, there’s an angry, worried, relieved furrow to his brow. I squeeze his hand back, as he brushes my hair out of my eyes. “I heard you in my dream.”

“I don’t care, Kutone.” He’s finally a little clearer. His reddened eyes are wet at the corners. “Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise me!”

I once said, Sebastian never speaks emphatically.

I was wrong about that. And I get it. I hold him together, and he does the same for me. That’s the way we are.

“I promise.”
I've done some thinking.

I'm not taking a break on this. I have self-care methods, as well as friends to help me stay away from completely burning out. I won't and I can't! I've worked so hard on this story that I just can't bring myself to "take a break" and stop writing.

Writing is basically the only thing I'm good at--the only form of expression I have some confidence in. And I can use it to tell stories and for just one moment, bring us all together.

So unless something horrible happens to me, I'm not gonna stop until I finish this. I'll see y'all next week! Catch me at my tumblr to chat and stuff!
Winter approached, and within days, left thick sheets of frosty white across the valley. Since winter in Zuzu City usually saw nothing more than inconvenient frost on the asphalt, or frozen pipes for the ill-insulated, Kutone was amazed, to say in the very least. With her awe came also a sadistic glee. After all, her old coworkers, probably still dreamt about winter vacations at cozy getaway cottages, and mugs of hot cocoa—and here she was, living those dreams. Suckers.

Before her, Oki kicked up a slurry behind him as he shot back and forth across the snowy farmland. Without a single care for his owner’s admonishments, he trailed frost back and forth from his adventures to the veranda, where he tracked wet pawprints around Kutone. Bedraggled tail spraying frosty droplets, he panted happily, drooping eyes closed in a grin.

“You silly thing,” Kutone muttered over her mug. “Don’t come whining to me when you feel that cold setting in.”

With a bark, Oki rolled against Kutone’s back, earning an exasperated, “Oh my goodness,” before Kutone rubbed her fingers under one of Oki’s folded ears.

She’d recovered quickly from Spirits’ Eve, sleep being her foremost medication. Harvey had interviewed her in her lucid moments, but Kutone kept her descriptions vague. “I got lost in the maze and must have hit my head on something,” she’d said, faking a headache. “I remember something like falling asleep, I guess.” Consternation had knitted Harvey’s brow, but with his patient in better spirits, he had no reason to detain her any longer.

Sebastian, on the other hand…

Kutone blew into her cocoa, ripples exuding a chocolatey waft, as Oki plunged into the snow again, this time with an unceremonious plop. Taking a sip, she let the steam warm her nipped nose and cheeks, as she chuckled at her dog’s bouncing reverie.

Sebastian, thought Kutone, really tried to not show his worry. Sometimes, he pulled it off well—he’d mastered apathy to an art form, after all. Other times, not so much, like when Harvey finally released Kutone from the clinic, Sebastian was already waiting in the lobby to accompany her back to the Banks. Past the bus stop and along the path leading away from town, he’d matched her pace and stopped her for rest whenever her breath sounded too heavy. Even when he’d safely delivered her to the front door to her house, he struggled to convince himself to leave. He couldn’t stop apologizing, either. “I know you’re tough,” he admitted, “and I like to think you wouldn’t hide from me, but…”

She’d scared him. Badly. She knew she had to lay his fears to rest. “Friday afternoon, before everyone else comes in,” she’d proposed, “we’ll meet at the Saloon. If I still don’t look like I’m at
“100%, I’ll let you drag me home.”

“I wouldn’t know the first thing to do to take care of you,” Sebastian replied with his usual uncertainty.

“You’re a smart guy. Observant.” It earned her a meek smile, and a hidden blush. “You’ll do fine by me.”

“Then you’d better rest up. I’m a harsh judge, you know.”

She wasn’t surprised to hear it, and so, spent her first week of winter lounging about the house. Swathed in heavy coat, thick scarf, and earmuffs, she made a daily habit of sitting on the steps of the front porch, hot cocoa between her gloved hands as she let Oki race back and forth across the frozen farmland. Of course, she also visited her other animals, but the cows, chickens, and even the wooly rabbit all caught on to their caretaker’s exhaustion, and accepted the slower-than-usual grooming and—for cows Jazzy and Daisy—milking. Occasionally, after finishing these chores and readying both cheese and mayonnaise presses, Kutone flipped through the pages of her notebook, and reflected on her old notes and completed lists for the Junimos.

The Junimos—before winter set in, she had managed to help them get the boiler room functional again. If they did feel the cold of winter, hopefully they found protection in that bottom-most room of the community center. But maybe, she thought, recalling an old tale about leaving treats for fairies, they could use something more.

She turned to the next page, a small list of winter fare. Winter root, snow yam, crystal fruit, and crocus flower—all goods she remembered seeing on the walk back from the clinic. And she still had time before meeting up with Sebastian at the Stardrop Saloon.

He wouldn’t begrudge her one foraging run, would he? And Oki could use the extra space for his daily snow run.

She downed the rest of her cocoa, and with a loud stomp on the porch, summoned Oki to her feet. “Let’s go for a walk,” she said, shuffling back inside. She forgave Oki’s wet prints on her floor, and placing her mug in the sink, stretched up to the pantry cabinets. Pulling down a jar of honey, as well as a stick of cinnamon sealed in a bottle, Kutone then slid to the fridge, producing a glass bottle of milk. Emptying the bottle into a small pot, she switched on the burner, warming the milk before pouring it into a separate, insulated bottle. All of these, plus a shallow bowl, she stashed into an extra bag, and just as quickly as she came in, she glided back out. Whistling a “C’mon, Oki!” she turned to the eastern path, and set off.

To say in the very least, the Junimos weren’t expecting Kutone’s furry companion, when farmer and dog shot into the community center. Usually, they watched their favorite human as soon as she walked across the threshold, but the pants and restrained barks of the golden dog had the forest sprites scrambling back into their niches and corners. Dogs, after all, had a terrible knack for finding Junimos. Plus, the great furry things were too oblivious to notice the sprites’ secrecy, and too social to maintain that secret. The worst of them played with Junimos like bouncy balls, and the group at the community center had heard enough horror stories about that unfortunate charade.

A few brave Junimos gave their favorite farmer some credit, noting with quiet chirps, the way she curled her fingers around the dog’s collar to keep him close. She let him shake snow water out at the door, and spoke a few stern words to him—something about *This isn’t your house at the Banks, so you have to be good!* The dog sneezed, then whimpered at the impromptu lecture, but at least he
listened. Even when his drooping eyes caught one of the Junimos creeping along the building’s beams, the dog said nothing. Sure, he wagged his tail like a mad fern in the wind, and he squeezed out a whine to get the farmer’s attention, but he didn’t start a ruckus.

So the Junimos agreed, Oki was not the dog who would use them as bouncy balls. As long as the farmer kept him under control, he was welcome in the community center.

Regardless of the Junimos’ tentative acceptance, as they skittered to and fro from shadow to shadow, Oki was nothing but grateful for the solid wood footing underneath his paws. While he loved sinking into the snow, that very sensation had left an odd throb in all four of his paws, like no matter where he stood, he would sink into the surface. Maybe that was “the cold” Kutone talked about. Or maybe it was just that his fur still had too much melted ice weighing it down, like no matter how much he shook out, it seeped down his hairs again.

But the building! Oh, the building! It gave him too many cases of the sneezies (Kutone called them that—Oh Oki, another round of the sneezies?), but it smelled so different from the Banks, like rain that stopped falling midway and hung like a sheet. Like old, old, dirt, the kind of dirt he found when he dug into the soil next to Kutone planting seeds, and unearthed that muddy and hard chicken that didn’t cluck even when he barked at it. And a faint—very faint, there was no way Kutone could smell it—mist of apple blossoms, an aroma that intensified and excited Oki every time one of the apple creatures ran by. The retriever wished he could play with the apples, but he didn’t want another lecture. For all her smiling, Kutone was scary when she got mad.

So he trailed at her heels instead, as she strode past the stone hut in the corner and down the corridor. Then she turned left, into a room with a smelly, sticky carpet. Oki snapped his paw away from the threshold, shying away even as Kutone went to the very middle of the room, and knelt low. One of the apples jumped to her side and accepted a tied linen bundle: the one she’d wrapped up the treasures they found.

Oki cocked his head to the side. He hadn’t realized, after all, the treasures were for the apples. They must be Kutone’s friends, then, because she only gave treasures to her best friends, like the lady who smelled like wood chips and sawdust, and the man who hid his smell, like smoldering nightshade, behind the smell of laundry on the clothesline, the sea, and lately, interestingly, Kutone’s smell. Unsure of how to feel about his human’s smell on another, Oki enjoyed the apple blossoms more, and wagged his tail as Kutone described the treasures in the bundle. Crocus and snow yam, crystal fruit and winter root. Oki found them for you.

Snow drifted outside as Kutone stood up from the floor, and walked back to the room’s threshold. The apple holding the collection of treasures shimmied past retriever and farmer, and down the corridor, but Kutone knelt to scratch at Oki’s sweet spots under his ears. “Good boy,” she whispered, and pressed a kiss on her best friend’s forehead. “One more stop in this building, okay? Then we have to get you back home.”

She loosened her pack from her shoulder as she strode back down the hall, with Oki, nails clicking on the wood, at her side again. This time, upon emerging into the expansive first room, she stopped at the stone hut next to the fireplace, and crouched low again. After peeking into the entryway of the hut, she smiled, and reached into her pack for first, the shallow bowl. Oki ambled close, nosing the bowl and casting what looked like an inquisitive glance, but Kutone tugged back on his collar. “Your snacktime’s gonna be at home. Back up.”

He circled behind her, and sidled up on her opposite side, as she reached into her pack again. This time, all of the contents came out—the honey jar, the insulated bottle of milk, the cinnamon stick, a mortar and pestle, and a spoon. Grinding the cinnamon into a fine powder, she then poured enough
warm milk to fill the bowl close to its rim. After pulling Oki away again, she dipped a spoon into the opened honey jar, and added a couple spoonfuls to the milk. “Fairy rose honey,” Kutone explained, as Junimos peeked around the corners of the hut and stared with sparkling eyes. “Should do the trick for you.”

Stirring the milk and honey a few times, she took a testing sip, and with an approving nod, sprinkled ground cinnamon on top. Around her, awed purrs and excited chirps echoed, bringing a smile to the corner of her lips. “Come on, then,” she said, packing up her ingredients and clicking her tongue for Oki’s attention. “Let’s go home.”

Oki was at the door before Kutone, when a chorus of chirps called to her. They harmonized into a sonorous Thank you!, as she stepped down from the threshold and out to the wintry town. She never looked back, but the Junimos’ fond warmth bloomed in her chest, like warmed milk in her tummy.

After toweling out snow water from Oki’s fur, and dragging his favorite mat to a safe yet perfect spot in front of the fireplace, Kutone changed outfits. Like any other girl—and she hated making that comparison of herself—going out to meet her boyfriend, she puzzled over the selection in her closet. The usual flannels and jeans? Definitely no dresses in this snowy weather. A sweater-and-jeans combination might stir unpleasant memories for Sebastian, so maybe that wasn’t a good idea either.

Yet, after mentally kicking herself—you’re not new to this dating thing, remember—she settled on that set: knitted sweater over an equally thick turtleneck, and a nice, dark pair of jeans she tucked into snow boots. Brushing her hair down from its usual twin tails, she pulled a knitted beanie over her ears, and cautioning Oki to stay warm and sleep tight, she slunk out the house and down the path for the second time that day.

Early afternoon in the winter shone in rosy shades of already-fading daytime, as Kutone pressed her tingling fingers to the Saloon’s doorknob. Surprised at her own lack of hesitation, she turned the knob, pushed the door in, and sauntered inside.

Even though winter froze the rest of town, the Saloon and its warm drinks and roaring fireplace had yet to pick up its nightly business. Gus and Emily shuffled back and forth between the barstand and the kitchen, preparing for the inevitable rush. Only when Kutone stepped forward, when the heel of her boot hit the wooden floor, did Emily turn away from wiping down the counter. Bright red lips turned up in a radiant grin, she gestured toward the doorway on Kutone’s right. “Right down that way, Kutone, at his usual spot,” she said. “Any wine tonight?”

“I’ll hold off,” Kutone replied, rubbing her palms together. “And it might be sherry instead.”

Gus smiled through his mustache, as he continued shining his glasses and steins. “Good choice, my friend. We’ll keep it in mind.”

Giving a grateful wave, Kutone turned into the Usual Spot, the game room with its minimal arcade, single soda machine, and pool table. And at the foot of that pool table, burying object balls into triangular rack with practiced ease, was Sebastian. Cue stick lying flat on the table, he glanced between the top point of the rack, and another point at the far end, and slid the balls to their proper location. So deeply concentrated in the game’s setup, he didn’t notice Kutone standing at the arcade room’s doorway until he lifted both cue stick and rack away from the table.

But when he did, the pool table ceased to exist. “Hey,” he started, approaching Kutone. He took a moment to gather himself. “How are you feeling?”
“A lot better, thank you.” She followed Sebastian into the arcade room, until he sat her down at the worn couch in the back corner of the game room. “No getting dragged back home for me.”

“Yeah,” Sebastian agreed. “You’re looking great.”

He maintained a meaningful simper for a split second, before he averted his eyes from Kutone’s, and began fiddling with the cue stick. “I heard you say something about sherry though,” he added. “Mind holding off on drinking for a little longer?”

“Still not convinced I’m okay?”

“Not that.” He handed the cue stick to Kutone. “I can’t have you falling asleep over our game.”

“Fair enough,” Kutone chuckled, pulling off her hat before accepting the cue stick. “Does it feel good to wipe the floor with me?”

“I’m testing some moves this time.”

“In other words,” said Kutone, crossing her arms, “you just want to show off.”

“That might be part of it.” Sebastian circled around to the head of the pool table, as he ground the tip of a second cue stick with a block of chalk. “Can you blame me, Kutone?”

His voice still faltered every time he ended a statement with her name, like in those last seconds, her existence sparked his awareness anew, and that verification floored him. Kutone snorted, hiding her charmed smile. “I guess not.”

“You’ve always been the understanding type.” He leaned over the table, and after lining the tip of the cue stick with the white cue ball, took a few testing strokes. “Mind if I break?”

“You’re better at it than I am.”

One more test stroke, and then with a satisfying crack, the neat triangular arrangement of the billiard balls burst apart like fireworks. The balls bumped and ricocheted around the table, until, finally, one fell in. “Guess I’m stripes,” said Sebastian, already moving to another side of the table.

In playing billiards with Sebastian, an opponent was either a guinea pig or a mopping rag. Generally, the determinant factor laid in Sebastian’s relationship to his opponent, but Pelican Town knew very well that no matter who he faced, a player could expect a total rout. Some idiots—like Sam, Sebastian joked—played again and again to find some weakness, some exploitable chink, in Sebastian’s play. And those same idiots turned to Kutone, who considered herself a decently good amateur, and implored her to become the game’s savior.

How she’d manage that, she had no idea. Concentration brought vestiges of confidence into Sebastian’s features, and Kutone loathed breaking a state so handsome. When he leaned over the table, sighting lines between the cue ball and his target, then called a pocket and took those testing strokes before slamming another satisfying crack—he became such a tease, such a man, in those moments, and that lovely serpent in Kutone’s mind uncoiled in allure.

He finally missed a call, and clicked his tongue in annoyance. Meeting Kutone’s sidelong look, however, he returned a smirk, and nodded to the table.

Her shorter stature meant she switched between different cue stick lengths more often than Sebastian. But she made them count. Crack. Solid 5 into the side pocket. Crack. 7 into the corner. Crack. Click. 2 grazed striped red 11, and got so close into another corner, but stopped at the lip of the pocket. Tsk.
At least it pushed Sebastian’s remaining stripes into a line, while the cue ball settled against the edge of the table. 9, 11, 15. No matter what angle he took, he’d need to make a difficult shot.

Kutone leaned back against the table, as Sebastian, mocking a thoughtful expression next to her, turned her a playful glare. “Really?”

She brushed a finger against his cheek. “You said you wanted to show off.”

He held still as she drew her touch down, flicking through his hair as she dropped her hand. Unlike other times when she touched him like this and he turned away, he held her gaze. The sounds in the Saloon—Emily and Gus with clinking glasses and bottles and dishes, running water in the kitchen, the blips of the game machines in the arcade room—all faded away. Sebastian’s eyes today, thought Kutone, were a lot like those dark clouds he watched on the horizon on rainy days, but unlike the clouds’ impermanence, a shine—like a lightning strike through the dark—made him there. Present. Not just another shadow.

“I like this a lot,” Sebastian whispered.

She turned her gaze away, allowing his breath to settle like a feather against her skin. “I get some pretty good ideas for dates,” she replied. Then, in a lower voice, “Comes with the experience.”

He had that look—of wanting to know more, of deciding whether to ask—but before he opened his mouth, Kutone cut in. “Come on then,” she murmured, nudging her shoulder against his arm, “I’ll kiss you if you make a call shot out of this.”

Embarrassment flared red in his ears, but Sebastian maintained the coolness in his voice. After a slight cough, of course. “Kick shot on 11.” He pointed his cue stick to a far corner pocket. Then, lifting himself to sit on the edge of the pool table, he drew his cue stick behind his back. “If I make it like this,” he added, keeping his eyes over his shoulder, “I want it on the lips.”

“You? Raising the stakes? You never told me you were a gambler.”

“Only when it matters.” Even in his awkward position, his test strokes were smooth, free of any wobble. “And it’d be kinda cool if I did pull this off.”

Cool, certainly, but for Kutone, problematic. Cheek kisses, she’d given, and they always succeeded in making Sebastian turn multiple shades of red, especially outside in public spaces. He refused to reciprocate in those moments, though his internal struggle to control himself was evident in the tight grip he clasped over her hand. A kiss on the lips, therefore, would likely short-circuit him.

If Kutone didn’t figuratively devour him first.

A few of her past partners functioned a lot like Sebastian. Unflappable, with a discreetly charming iciness that melted as soon as she wrapped her fingers around their weaknesses. For one, the slightest show of her skin did it. Another, her cocktail-warmed breath in his ear. And then for one more, who admitted to Kutone being his first everything, that nibble on his ear reduced him to, “Sweet Yoba, Kutone, I think I’m in love,” and afterward culminated in a difficult two weeks of trying to shake him off.

She couldn’t do that to Sebastian. Even if he weren’t the type to drown himself in her—and Kutone knew he wasn’t, or at least tentatively guessed he wasn’t—the possibility alone made her hesitant. This good thing they had going, this him-checking-on-her thing, this playing-billiards-together-with-no-one-else-around thing—all so pure beyond her mindless fucking around, that she didn’t want Sebastian to become another link in that long chain. If anything, she wanted him to sever it.
Just not with a kiss he was trying to win like a trophy.

Tease him, she thought. Distract him. Misdirection is your game. Make sure he can’t make that shot. “Seb,” she started, drawing close enough to trace circles on his knee, “I’m gonna go for that sherry now.”

“Hold on.” He shuddered, blushed, but held his focus. He was seeing the trajectory of the cue ball to the cushion to that red striped 11 sitting between 9 and 15. Testing the power of his shot—hard enough to send 11 into another wall and ricochet it into that corner pocket, but only just enough the cue would either stop or roll back only a hair. He wanted this one shot so bad, because Kutone never gave him kisses on his lips, and maybe he thought this was the only way he could convince her he wanted her.

Unspoken honesty. She just couldn’t stop him.

Crack.

The cue hit the cushion.

Crack.

Then red striped 11, eleven like strangers facing a sunset sky, like lovers about to kiss under oncoming twilight, rolled across the green. 9 and 15 nudged out the of the way. Cue rolled back too far—it wasn’t the shot he wanted. 11 hit the cushion, sailed toward the pocket.

Bumped against the pocket’s jaw and rolled toward the other corner. It stopped with a kiss on Kutone’s 2. 2 rolled into the pocket.

While Kutone breathed relief through her nose, Sebastian groaned. “Too hard,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. He slid off the edge of the pool table and rolled his shoulders. “Angle’s off too.”

“Still, impressive,” said Kutone. She curled the drawstrings of his sweatshirt around her finger. “Behind the back and you got one of mine in. Show-off.”

“Do I at least get a consolation prize, then?”

Was Sebastian always this bold? Consideration curled Kutone’s lip, as she met Sebastian’s mocking smirk with skepticism. But not for long, she thought. Put him in his place. After all, he still had no clues to the breadth of her treachery, or her shame, past or otherwise. She yanked hard on the drawstrings, pulling him, stumbling, close enough she could lean forward and give him that peck on the lips he so wanted. And he had that aching, tearful look, that begging expression he dared not lend his voice to.

So adorable. She could compromise. She pressed her lips to the corner of his, earning a sharp breath and shift in his weight, as he dropped his cue stick and slid his arms around her waist. No cares that they were still at the Saloon, with an incomplete game of billiards behind him. No caution to the fact Emily or Gus could come check on them at any moment—all Sebastian seemed to care about, as Kutone pulled back, was how he could get the taste of her milky lips directly on his. “Please?” he murmured, breathing onto her lips just barely out of his reach.

She leaned close, kissing his jawline once before whispering back, “Soon,” in a hot breath as though stained by cinnamon.

But maybe, on Sebastian’s skin, heat became cold. He shivered against her, but conniving serpent that she was, she smiled anyway.
Today, she decided, was not the day to open her box of secrets. Not even for Sebastian.
I'm starting to realize we're in the "second arc" of this fic. Now, this entire story's mapped out. I have an idea of where the fic's going, but I think this "second arc" is shaping into something a bit more toned-down and introspective than what I initially figured. Especially since, I'm noticing, the central focus is shifting to someone who's become more willing to cooperate with me.

I hope I can continue to deliver on this fic, you guys. Please keep sending those kudos and comments—that's how you guys can tell me how the story's going! Oh, and you can find me on [tumblr](https://tumblr.com) if you'd rather talk to me in private!

How fun it was to tease a boy she loved! Especially when the backdrop provided the best ambience, a slight tease held the power to sway imagination, and Kutone knew she had that effect on Sebastian. They’d never finished the game after his gambit, because the Friday night crew had started rolling in, and the ambience flared ever more in her favor.

At the first entrants—and reflecting back on that Friday, Kutone didn’t care who they were—Sebastian tried fidgeting out of her snare. “People are going to see…!”

Because he hated having witnesses to his vulnerability, dancing like a butterfly trapped between her palms. But she had him pinned between her body and the pool table, and with the drawstrings of his sweatshirt still knotted around her fingers, he had no escape. And he very nearly lost the will to do so, when she pressed her cheek against his and whispered, “So as long as no one sees, right?” and left feathery kisses trailing up to his ear. “Tell me when you see Sam or Abby around that corner.”

They were the only people, other than Sebastian or Kutone, to ever go into the game room. He swallowed hard, mumbling, “You can’t do this to me,” as he pressed his hands to her hips. Preparation to either push her away, or pull her even closer. Smart boy.

She stopped herself in the middle of that reverie, reflecting again on her first thought. How fun it was

to tease a boy

she loved.

Snow dampened all sound around her as she leaned against the banister of her veranda. Her breaths through her nose elongated into a sigh. “I love him, huh?”

Hopelessly so. Not that she needed or wanted to reveal this revelation to Sebastian. Yet. Or maybe, she never would tell him. Love, after all, was a drug that could eventually be tolerated. Personal experience told Kutone as much. Once a woman heard “I love you” without her chest forcing itself to reciprocate that feeling, she’s built tolerance. Once “love” crumbled into monotone on the lips, and hung limp in the mind, a woman’s successfully built her tolerance. But love—or at least, the concept of love—became vibrant in those moments of true, hopeless affection—moments like Kutone staring...
across the snow covering Breezy Banks, moments like the shudder of Sebastian’s body under her touch. Moments when the world narrowed its vision to just two shadows in an amberlit game room, and moments which still held distance within their breadths.

And even then, the words and the moments burned on her tongue, like an unwanted, unreasonably painful spice she wished she could spit into the snow.

“Hey, look, she’s daydreaming about Sebastian again.”

Snorting, she lifted a hand and waved to Sam and Abigail, puffing in their coats along the path leading to her doorstep. “If you keep talking like that,” she replied, “I’m not letting you use my house for whatever it is you’re planning.”

“The Situation Room,” Sam proudly stated. “Where we can plot things behind people’s backs and they’ll never know of the inception.”

Abigail rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You’re for sure Seb’s not coming for an impromptu visit today, Kutone?”

“Not today. Work’s got him hibernating in that basement.”

“Perfect,” Sam drawled. “Today’s briefing requires ol’ Seb out of the picture for a little longer than usual.”

Sebastian very much appreciated his chances to stay “out of the picture,” though Kutone decided against voicing this fact. Breaking Sam’s heart seemed like an offense to God or Yoba or whatever deity lorded over kindness and sunshine. Instead, she offered fresh cocoas to Sam and Abigail, as they tromped into the farmhouse and shed their thick coats and snow shoes.

Deeming the beverage worthy, Sam sank into the sofa in the living room, while Abigail sat at the tea table. “So!” Sam practically owned the sofa’s dark cushions with his luxuriating slouch. “Kutone! While you so graciously prepare those worthy drinks—”

“You’ve been playing that game way too much with Seb,” Abigail cut in. “This isn’t Solarion, you know.”

“It’s a thing called ‘mojo’!” cried Sam. “You know that dude’s a freakin’ problem year after year for us!”

Oki shuffled around the corner from Kutone’s room, and met his best friend’s heels as she brought a tray, laden with three steaming mugs, to the tea table. “What dude,” ventured Kutone, with a knowing simper, “is your problem year after year?”

Abigail happily took a mug off the tray, as Sam leapt up for his share. “Sebastian,” Abigail said, testing the cocoa with careful sips. “Remember I said his birthday’s in the winter?”

She mentioned something like that, when they talked about possible winter gift baskets at an impromptu autumn potluck. “I didn’t realize that was coming up so soon.”

Sam gaped. Closed his mouth. Crossed his arms, and shook his head. “That guy, I swear,” he grumbled. “You too, Kutone—I thought you’d be the type of girl to pay attention to your boyfriend’s birthday!”

She had too many to remember before, that her mind’s capacity had been completely spent on navigating multiple birthday dates, without getting caught. Or getting caught, and rolling her eyes at
the consequences. “I don’t even pay attention to my own,” she instead replied. “And Sebastian never dropped hints.”

“He never says what he wants,” Abigail agreed. “Every year, it’s ‘no, there’s nothing I particularly want,’ or ‘you guys don’t have to bother,’ and it’s like, he doesn’t understand we want to celebrate our friend, you know?”

“So this is the situation it comes to every year for us,” Sam finished. “Me and Abigail, trying to figure out what we can do for Seb this year.”

He has such good friends, thought Kutone, sitting in the chair opposite from Abigail. Sipping also on her cocoa, she gave Oki, lounging at her feet, a gentle rub with her toe. “What did you do last year?”

“Firecrackers at the beach,” said Sam, grinning. “Elliot chased us off and got Lewis to saddle me with even more service hours.”

“That was after our peace offering of campfire kebabs,” Abigail added. “He spared Seb because it was his birthday, and let Sam take my share of the blame.”

“Such chivalry,” Kutone laughed. “So whatever you do this year, I’m guessing nothing that would sentence you to community service yet again?”

Preferably, was Sam’s answer, but the town prankster had dried up on new ideas, and he waved away any schemes he considered trite. Surprise parties earned a definite no, as setup called for some amount of avoidance, and a near-disastrous attempt in some bygone year had apparently molded Sebastian into his current antipathy. While Kutone considered asking for details, Abigail moved on to her next suggestion: something, anything, involving Kutone, as a way to not only celebrate their friend’s birthday, but also permanently dismantle Sebastian’s usual gloominess.

Here, Kutone had to cut in, as she took her guests’ mugs back to the kitchen and set them in the sink. Running hot faucet water over the empty mugs, she washed and rinsed as she stated, “I don’t think that’s the right word for him anymore.”

Sam nodded, and clicked his tongue at Abigail. “It’s never been the right word, Ab. Give our friend a little more credit than that.”

“You know what I mean,” Abigail replied. “It’s like he constantly hates himself but it’s not so severe that we need to keep an eye on him. Neither is it so low-key that we can just say, ‘hey that’s Seb being Seb,’ you know? I mean, it is, but it’s a little more than that?”

Constantly hates himself? It was a new perspective, and yet, sounded so familiar. Stopping the running water, she took a dish towel to the still-warm ceramic, and as she wiped water droplets off the mugs, put them away in their respective cabinets. Constantly hates himself. The nuance, thought Kutone, might be a little off in describing Sebastian’s melancholy, but with the description coming directly from his closest friends, worry took root in her chest.

After all, ever since starting this whole dating-Sebastian thing, she couldn’t recall a single instance of her listening to him. Granted, she never probed him, just like he never probed her, but in a lot of their conversations, Sebastian provided the listening ear. Sebastian provided the consolation. Sebastian gave, and Kutone took. It wasn’t a happy scenario.

I did warn him, she thought, that I’m the worst for this significant other thing.

His most recent counter: You’re just out of practice. Rhei was your last serious relationship, wasn’t he?
Which cowed her out of a valid argument or justification, as well as the truth. Damp dish towel bundled between her hands, she leaned back against the sink, and sighed. Sebastian might be happy with listening to and providing for her, so it wasn’t a matter of he couldn’t be happy with their unbalanced give-and-take.

She didn’t want him to be happy with it.

Abigail glumly sighed next. “Look, even Kutone’s stumped.”

Sam, arms crossed, and frowning against the jumbled plotting in his head, snorted. “You guys give up too easy. But.” His expression melted into defeat. “I’m out of ideas too. The simplest guys are always the hardest to plan for.”

The Situation Room adjourned in the afternoon, without a single step in the right direction. Sam “assigned” homework, asking both Abigail and Kutone to come up with “something fresh and new, but simple enough to suit The Subject,” and promised to provide his own input for the next meeting, slated for the next day.

In thinking about Sebastian, however, as Kutone sat in front of her TV, muted on the weather report, with a book—of course borrowed from Sebastian—in her lap and Oki lounging next to her, her thoughts meandered toward unsettling insecurities instead. Come on, she again told herself, you’re not new to this dating thing!

Two years of taking advantage of people, however, was not the same as actual dating. That was breaking people’s hearts and indulging that sadistic snake. But this, this peaceful, “hey I really like you and want to hang out more often and possibly take this to the next level” scenario—this, like Sebastian had guessed, she only had once before. With Rhei.

And they’d fucked that up something awful.

For Sebastian’s sake, she had to make it work. She refused to indulge that past her. Vowed to treat this one, this boy who softened the edges of her imperfections, with the gentleness and respect he deserved. And that started, as she’d gathered from The Girls once upon an unhappy time, with listening to him when he needed her.

Did he need her? He handled himself so well he probably didn’t need someone to support him. At least, not all the time. Then, where, exactly, could she start to make changes—to be better? Absently, she brushed her palm down Oki’s back, earning a happy snort and tail flick. “The simplest guys,” she echoed, “are always the hardest to plan for.” How apt. Maybe that’s why she couldn’t figure things out with Rhei either.

Maybe Sebastian was a futile exercise—

Faint knocks sounded behind her. Oki barked in return, as he levered himself to his feet. Another visitor, huh? What a busy day.

Outside, shivering in her jacket and sneakers, was Maru. Even Kutone blinked hard, but seeing ice water seeping into Maru’s shoes, she waved the girl inside. “Shoes off and in front of the fireplace,” said Kutone, whipping into the kitchen for a pot. “Is cocoa with milk okay?”

“Cocoa with milk would be fantastic,” Maru replied, working her frozen joints to comply with Kutone’s demands. Bare feet facing the fire, and her shoes and socks against the side of the hearth, she rubbed both hands under Oki’s face. “Sebastian told us he’d be working all day, so I—I wanted
to stop by.”

“ Seems like that’s the cool thing to do today.” She stirred cocoa powder into a mug of hot milk, and leaving the spoon in the swirling chocolate, brought it back to Maru. “So? What are you trying to hide here from your brother?”

Maru toyed with the spoon in the mug, sounding gentle clinks as Kutone sat on the floor next to her. “I saw Sam and Abigail on my way from the clinic,” she started. “They were talking about needing new ideas. Sebastian’s birthday, right?”

Kutone nodded.

After a sip and content smile, Maru sighed. “So I guess this is an annual problem even for them.” She cast a sideways gaze, through the gap between the lens and frame of her glasses. “Have you decided on something for him?”

Must be part of the girlfriend expectation. Public girlfriend expectation—that was the major difference between Rhei and Sebastian, after all. With Rhei, no one knew about him and Kutone for a good six months. But with Sebastian, his being an item with Kutone threatened to reach the gossip gateway called Robin in less than two months. Much as she loved the carpenter, Kutone heaved an exhausted sigh, but spared Maru by responding, “I’ll figure it out, eventually.”

Pursing her lips together, Maru looked down at her cocoa again. “You’re so like him,” she said. “I guess that’s another reason why he likes you, huh?”

Maru’s downcast expression clouded the positivity she once radiated in early, rainy autumn. “I tried. I really tried, you know, to listen to him. Turns out, that’s a little hard to do when he never comes out of his room. Or never sits at the dinner table long enough for us to carry a conversation for me to listen to.”

So, she wasn’t the only one learning about the myriad shades of Sebastian’s silence. Of course, Kutone thought, as Oki cast a whimper between her and Maru, that wasn’t Sebastian’s fault.

“Kutone,” Maru started, tightening her fingers around her mug, “we don’t have a lot of time, you know.”

Until his birthday? No. Maru pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, but the frames slipped back down. Firelight and television backlight glared against the refracting surfaces of her lenses, but failed to hide her budding tears. “This might be his last winter here, and I really—I want to call him Brother.”

His last winter. Sebastian never was definite about his future plans. All he ever said was, “I don’t want to be away from you,” a dangerously temporary statement Kutone heard before, and so, invested no part of herself.

For this moment, however, she pushed her concerns aside. Without Oki’s gentle licks against her cheek, Maru’s composure threatened to fall apart into sobs. “Have you two always been this distant?”

“I’m not sure. I mean—” Maru chewed on her lip. “I remember him being around. Dad and Mom teaching me, ‘that’s your brother,’ and Sebastian—you know—he never smiles! Well, that’s not true either; it’s this really slight, soft ambience of a smile that you can feel, but you can’t see, and to be really honest, I feel that from him more often lately—just, not because of us, his family. I think,” she paused, finally looking up from her mug, to Kutone. “I think it’s you.”
“Forget me for a second here,” replied Kutone with a dismissive wave. “You understand a subtlety like that? You know that’s more than he would ask for.”

“But that doesn’t get me any closer to him, Kutone! I want to know how you did it! How Sam and Abigail can do it—how my brother will let all of you in, but not—not me.”

Suspicion snuck around the corners of Kutone’s thoughts, and folded into a frown across her features. While Sebastian never spoke much about his family, Robin and Maru revealed enough of their concerns for him that Kutone knew, that misunderstanding was not the family’s dysfunction. For one, Robin clearly gave Sebastian his space, and despite her subtle pushes to get her son out into fresh air and company, they carried easy conversation. And here was Maru, nearly crying into her lukewarm cocoa, over not being able to call her half-brother, “Brother.” Even though the absence of those words wedged the distance between the siblings, Maru still had a grasp on Sebastian’s habits.

Which was more than could probably be said for Demetrius, but Kutone decided to puzzle that part out another time. Demetrius wasn’t unreasonable, after all.

She reflected on her own experiences. How did she start with Sebastian, again? Sparks crackled in the fireplace, and Oki, relieved of his duties with a loving pet from Maru, sunk into a doze on his favorite mat. Maru’s shoes and socks were likely bone-dry, and with evening fast descending during the winter, Maru had to get home, soon. Yet Kutone watched the embers falling into ash, and then said, “He and I—we—we started at the lake.”

Maru was still, as Kutone went on. “We didn’t talk much, actually. Just sat through an early summer evening. I think he really wanted me to leave, but I wanted to stay.” She shrugged, finally looking away from the fire. “So I did.”

“And he just let you?”

“Told him I liked the quiet, and he seemed pretty okay with that.”


The last of Kutone’s reflections flitted through her memory. “We talked books after that for a few seconds.”

“A few seconds?”

“He ran away.”

Maru snorted a chuckle. “That sounds like Sebastian.”

“You know him a lot better than I do, Maru.”

“I know you’re trying, Kutone,” Maru sighed. “But that’s just not true. Compared to Sam and Abigail—”

“I bet you could tell me something new about him right now.”

Taken aback by the challenge, Maru straightened her back and curled her lip into a pout. She met Kutone’s expectant stare with a shake of her head, and then slowly shrugged. “He does make a really good spaghetti.”

Kutone took her turn to blink, baffled. “He told me he’s no good in the kitchen.”
“Oh, he really isn’t.” A smile began glowing in Maru’s features. “Other than his coffee, of course. But he tried this recipe he found online, and Mom loved it so much she won’t make her own spaghetti anymore.”

That’s pretty severe, thought Kutone, but seeing Maru look up to the ceiling, lost in thought, she decided to keep her comments to herself. The cogs in Maru’s memories were creaking to life.

“He used to collect vintage comics, until Mom threw them out.”

“Doubt he was too happy about that.”

“Oh, Yoba, no. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Sebastian with that much color in his face, he was so mad.” Maru laughed, but nodded next in approval. “But he didn’t argue, and he never raised his voice to Mom. Although, I bet you’d get a twitch out of him if you mentioned those comics.”

Kutone noted to do otherwise, as Maru went on.

“Sebastian was the one who taught me how to build a snowgoon!” she exclaimed. “Mine still turn out pretty terrible, but every year he builds his, it’s always this perfect little guy built to last all the way through winter.”

Cute. She leaned an elbow against her knee, and pressed her cheek into her knuckles. Hearing Maru’s stories of Sebastian as an older brother, drew comfort over her thoughts. Granted, Sebastian’s counterarguments were already clear in Kutone’s mind: Mom’s just overexaggerating. I’m just growing up. Demetrius took it down anyway. Mismatched paces and steps. Seeing the same things from different eye levels. Telepathy not working. Normal dysfunctions in any relationship.

The tension in Maru’s shoulders relaxed then, as one last realization sank into her entire body. “You know,” she started, “we used to talk about collaboration projects. I’d build the hardware, and he’d write the software. We used to talk about a mini-robot squad that would help out Mom with her housework and woodwork, and Dad with his research. We even started searching for components online, and I was drawing up blueprints, and then—then he just…shut down.”

“Shut down?”

Maru stared down at her cocoa, cold and marbling as milk separated from chocolate. Then, guzzling it down, she breathed out in satisfaction, and shook her head. “It could have been anything. Maybe it was an argument he had with Dad. Or that he started working and just didn’t have time for me anymore.”

He grew up. Most answers about relationships were just that simple. Sebastian might have answered the same way. Then again, Demetrius’s constant doting on Maru likely spurred Sebastian’s bitterness into outright distaste. As he retreated within himself, his distaste melted down to its core: a sense of inferiority, that no matter how much he tried, he remained a shadow in Maru’s radiance. How familiar.

But Maru, huffing and likely indignant about this fact, jumped to her feet. “That doesn’t matter anymore!” She turned an imploring, searching expression to Kutone. “We need to do something together. Like before. Not just talking, not just listening—we have to do.”

“So, what do you suggest?”

When the Situation Room gathered the next day, its leader citing Kutone’s hot cocoas a possibly
developing addiction, Sam and Abigail had the pleasure of greeting a new member. Nervous Maru sat at the edge of Kutone’s sofa, with a laptop open in front of her. She gestured with a shy wave. “I didn’t mean to crash the group,” she started. “But I’m assuming this is the HQ for Sebastian’s birthday plans?”

“This,” Sam started, “is freaking amazing!” He slid into an open seat next to Maru, while Abigail plopped down on the other side. “Four heads are better than three, y’know?! And, and, maybe we can finally make some headway between you and that bonehead you call a brother!”

Maru’s nervousness loosened then, as she looked to both Sam and Abigail. “You don’t think he’s going to be too mad if I join in?”

“More like the opposite,” said Abigail. “He might even start crying.”

Negative, thought Kutone. But Sebastian could do with a little bit of a shock, too. Maybe finally understand he wasn’t as stone-cold and emotionless as he thought he was. Little sisters have a way of doing that, though only-child Kutone could only guess from books and TV shows.

Besides, Maru’s idea was fantastic. Simple enough for Sebastian, but something everyone could do together. Kutone had already transferred her share of the gift’s hefty price tag to Maru’s account. And Maru would, for sure, convince Sam and Abigail to do the same.

She left the three to their planning, upbeat and enthusiastic. Sebastian really had the best friends anyone could ask for.

And contagious. She didn’t realize she was smiling, until much later.
Solarion Chronicles Limited Edition Expansion Pack: Episode of the Desert Serenade. According to Maru’s findings online, the pack even came with multiple scenario routes, some tailored to fill in backstory for certain character classes. With a release date slated for the day before Sebastian’s birthday, Sam and Abigail deemed it a great choice in gift, and happily transferred their shares of the price tag to Maru.

Of course, as soon as Maru confirmed the order, and designated Pierre’s General Store as the delivery address, the three’s eyes turned to Kutone.

So what’s the girlfriend getting for her boyfriend?

Honestly speaking, as the group adjourned in high spirits, and as the winter days dragged on toward the Festival of Ice, she still had no idea. Exposure to the group’s positivity had lengthened the shadows in Kutone’s thoughts again. More than ever, she starved to tell Sebastian more about herself, about the warnings she’d dropped ever since their mutual mid-autumn confessions, about why she wouldn’t kiss him on the lips: about the truth. After all, despite his outward civility and patience, Sebastian’s frustration was becoming more and more palpable.

“It’s not you,” she told him on one of his visits to the Banks. Completely ignoring the cold frosting her cheeks and reddening her fingers, she had embraced him tightly. “I’m trying to be really, really careful with you—so it’s really not you.”

The flat, gray words only instilled a darker mood across Sebastian’s features, but stubbornness, as well as Kutone’s warmth pressed against his chest, compelled him to stay. “I still don’t get why,” he’d replied. “And you know I’d listen.”

“You’re always so sweet like that.”

Despite Sebastian’s reassurances, Kutone knew she was playing a hard gamble. First off, no one liked hearing about exes, serious or otherwise. And second, no one liked facing the ugly truths. Could she depend on Sebastian to see her, figuratively mottled and stained, without turning away and retching? Part of her trusted his flexibility. Another part vehemently shook itself and screamed, No.

Compliments only worked so many times, however, and with Sebastian, naturally resistant to most forms of positive reinforcement, her deflections were already starting to lose their effects. And she dared not dredge up other tactics to keep his mind off his frustration. That, she thought, was power play, and like other times before, she vowed to never use those plays against Sebastian.

She had to tell him. Open up to him. And soon.

The day of the Festival of Ice dawned bright and crystalline, with the sun glimmering along the white snow over Stardew Valley for miles into the distance. Bare trees stood unmoving in the windless morning, as though even the slightest twitch of their branches would leave imprints in the snow below them. Only Kutone’s breath disturbed the blinding winter, as she, huddled in her thick parka and knitted cap and scarf, sat on the front steps of her veranda, and thought.

First, she parsed her musings into statements.
One: Her fallout with Rhei wasn’t only his fault.

Two: She hurt a lot of people. Purposely.

Three: She might do the same to Sebastian, if they decided to push forward together.

Conclusion—and it came with a pang—she didn’t want to hurt him, and neither did she want to push him away. Since when had she become so greedy?

She stood from her seat and stretched her toes inside her snow boots. The festival began some time ago, just before the sun began its blinding ascent. She figured she’d cushioned enough time for the festivities to have picked up, and set out across the Banks. Her steps crunching through the snow repeated those parses again.

One: Not his fault.

Two: A lot of people.

Three: She might do the same to Sebastian.

One: Not.

Two: A lot.

Three: The same.

Segmented thoughts stuck on repeat muddled easily, yet Kutone processed them again and again. She challenged herself to figure it out before she next saw Sebastian. Before she stepped into Cindersap Forest and started enjoying her first Festival of Ice. He deserved at least that much for his mounting frustration.

Her steps echoed along the frost-crusted wood of the Banks’s bridges, as the perennial waters continued their trickling flow. She stopped, and watched the surface, glittering like a mirror. Deciding to do something—that was easy. Kutone was stuck on the how and when. “Face-to-face” and “soon” weren’t viable answers anymore.

And where would she start?

She set off again, her clumping steps across the bridge fading back into muted crisps across the snow. “You know,” she rehearsed, “it wasn’t entirely Rhei’s fault.”

No, she thought, pursing her chilled lips. That sounds like I want to go back to Rhei, when I want to stay here. And though sudden conversations of serious natures rarely fazed Sebastian, Kutone decided she wanted to ease him into the topic.

“How do you feel,” she started again, looking up at the sky, “about your girlfriend being a serial heartbreaker?”

She grimaced, wrinkling her nose and sighing a long plume of breath into the air. Some twisted part of her apparently still glorified the gratification she tasted from watching lovers cry. To the boys and girls she’d slept with, “Kutone” became synonymous with “goddess,” and to see her devoted followers crack, crumble, and eventually fade into nonexistence—after the steaming, gleeful climaxes, the emotional breakdowns were always the perfect downers.

But even before that, most people were fragile about a woman with vast experience. Some believed
experience made her beautiful, independent. In their eyes, she knew what she wanted, and spurned the rejection of her peers. In the radiance of this strength, the world fell into step around her, and while she eventually absolved her sins, glory still glowed in her wake.

But in the minds of real people milling through the hours of work-desk slaving, an experienced woman elicited a conscious blindness to her humanity. According to them, she slept around and broke hearts due to an addiction. Or she hadn’t found the right man to quash her illicit instincts. She became ugly and broken and a forsaken blot in the divine eye, but the truth—invisible to them—laid in the shortness of her breath, the balling of her fists, the ashamed aversion of her eyes, and the grind of her teeth digging into her lip, whenever she faced the kindness of a boy who had no idea.

Sins against other people were never absolved, after all, leaving their crystallized weight behind to pull heavy on her future decisions. Sebastian’s naivete always made her smile at the irony, but regarding herself, she needed him to wake up.

So how about, “Listen. I know I haven’t reciprocated. I can tell you why.”

Simple and straight to the point, with the bonus of totally skipping the Can we talk scenario. That could work. All she needed, after getting Sebastian’s attention, was a private spot to face him and spill herself. Expose herself, and then, let him decide on how he wanted to take the relationship. Cindersap Forest luckily provided many concealed patches of privacy.

Already, as Kutone crossed the last bridge and passed through the southern exit of the Banks, she spotted a few potential places toward the western edges of the forest. A copse there, not far from the frozen lake where Lewis and Willy sawed out blocks from the ice for the fishing contest. And the far end of Arrowhead Island, across the bridge from where Jas, Vincent, and Penny collaborated on a snowman. Maybe even, that circle of trees obscuring the path deeper west into the darker woodlands.

Plenty of opportunities, Kutone thought, and scanned across the forest clearing in front of Marnie’s ranch. Sebastian’s black sweatshirt should stand out like ink on paper, as long as he hadn’t hidden himself behind one of the forest’s pine trees.

But black wasn’t the only color visible against white snow.

A green letterman jacket, especially on the shoulders of a sportsman like Alex, probably stood out more than the shadow lengthening in front of Kutone.

Separate from the rest of the festivities, Alex, arms crossed and chatting as usual with Haley, leaned back against the ranch’s fences. With a nudge from Haley, stylish parka and brand-new snow boots sparkling in the winter sunlight, Alex turned around, and seeing Kutone, straightened his back. Breathed deep and exhaled a great cloud of breath over his scarf. Squared his shoulders.

And hands in the pockets of his jacket, stalked over.

“Can we talk?”

What should have happened: Kutone landing a knockout punch to leave Alex out like an exploded lightbulb.

What actually happened, due to the undeniable sway of those three damn words, was a resigned shrug, and Alex led Kutone westward. Haley, meanwhile, skipped back toward the festival, or at least, shuffled through the snow and bounced the golden waves of her hair enough she held the illusion of skipping.
Alex chose a circle of trees and bushes off the banks of the frozen lake, and hands still deep in his pockets, breathed a re-orienting sigh. “I know,” he started, “you weren’t leading me on.”

Ah. A different variation, but Alex was going the I need to know what’s going on route. Likely, Kutone surmised, a “because” and a confession hanging after that, and the thought alone made her pale in cold sweat.

“Back in autumn,” continued Alex, voice slow and deliberate, “I asked you out. You turned me down. I got that. Fair enough.”

“So what needs clarification?” Too cold, she thought, cringing. Don’t lash out. You never planned this. You weren’t trying to break his heart then, and you’re not trying to do it now. She tried again. “I mean, I’m guessing someone suggested I was leading you on? When I wasn’t?” Her frosted cheeks flared icy hot. Why did they already sound like a couple in the middle of a row?

“That’s not—no—that’s not it. You were clear about it. ‘Don’t hold your breath.’” Alex lifted a hand out of his pocket, and irritably rubbed his face. “I know I’m probably the dumbest in the valley, but I got that. You were being nice.”

So why this talk? If the pattern continued any further in its permutation, Kutone needed to run. Extricate herself from the tangles of this damningly overplayed scenario, and fucking run. Prove that she had nothing to do with whatever would next come out of Alex’s mouth, and just, fucking, run. I’m not doing this to him, she told herself. I’m not the one this time—it’s not me!

“I just need you to hear me out. Just, I gotta get it off my chest before it makes me even weirder around you.”

I already know, she wanted to scream. I already know, and thank you for your feelings, but I can’t! I fucking can’t, I’m committed now, I’m a committed woman, and I’m not gonna fuck this up—

“I’ve had a massive freakin’ crush on you since you first moved in to town.”

Really. She really should have knocked the daylights out of the poor guy, and left him for the snow to bury him. But she turned her groan inward, and changed it into placidity. As Alex ducked half his face under his scarf, Kutone rocked back and forth on her heels, squeezing her frustration into one short, “Oh.”

“They’re short lived! I swear to you, my crushes never last this long, but Kutone…” He dragged down the scarf muffling him, and cast shy eyes in her direction. “Kutone, it’s been hard this time. I really, really like you.”

Her racing thoughts, and even the admonishment she directed at herself, screeched to a halt, as two terrifying facts came to the light of her mind.

One, an old voice: You could play them both. You've done it before.

Two: a silhouette had appeared in the shadow of the tree behind Alex, and it was difficult to mistake a dark-skinned, flat-topped grown man against the valley’s snowy landscape.

How Demetrius had silenced his steps, Kutone decided not to guess, but she wished and begged an icicle could rocket down from the trees and impale her on the spot. She forced her attention back to Alex, tanned features bright red, and stiff in anticipation of her reply.

Be. Careful.
“Alex,” she started, her voice trembling in unison with her scrambled thoughts, “trust me, when I say I appreciate your feelings.” She cast a quick glance to Demetrius, unmoving. “As someone who’s felt like an outsider for so long, it’s—it’s nice, to be so accepted that you’ve developed those feelings.”

Her response was getting too long-winded. A listener could mistake her words for flattery. Stop. End it. “You understand though, don’t you, that I’ve a thing with Sebastian?”

Alex silently stared at the snow-covered ground beneath him. While his scarf muffled his breath again, his eyes held a soft, sad glow: sunlight, Kutone hoped, reflecting off the surface of the frost. He blinked once, hard. “When one of your closest friends is a gossip fountain named Haley,” he murmured, “a guy hears a lot of things.” He blinked again. “And still stupidly hopes, y’know?”

“Gossip doesn’t need a name,” said Kutone, equally quiet. “I’m sorry, Alex.”

His scarf failed to muffle his heavy sniff. He swallowed and shook his head. “You don’t have to apologize. Like I said, Haley told me everything she heard and saw, and I kept holding on to this stupid crush. It’s on me.”

“Look, it’s not your fault—!”

“So, what, is he actually kind of a cool guy?” Alex looked up from the ground, inquiring Kutone with wet eyes. “Not that I talk to him. Ever. He’s kind of an asshole. Weirdo too. Who the fuck wears black all the time? What’s up with that hairstyle? Y’know?”

Demetrius shifted slowly, quietly, avoiding Alex’s listening ear. Kutone, still keeping one eye on Demetrius’s reactions, replied, curtly, “I don’t know. But for someone who gave the outsider a chance, you won’t do the same for your neighbor? Who’s really the asshole here?”

His eyes went wide, like her words had physically, brutally, slapped him. Then, as he looked back down to the ground, at the space between his and Kutone’s feet, he grumbled his response. “I gave you a chance because—!”

“If you knew me, the person I was before moving out here, you wouldn’t have.” She waited until Alex looked up again. Fully aware of Demetrius turning his enraptured observation to her, and yet, fully uncaring of his scrutiny due to her bubbling anger, she went on. “If you knew even the slightest reason why I moved out here, you definitely wouldn’t have.”

Alex’s tears had frozen into dry, cold streaks at the corners of his eyes, as he silently regarded Kutone. Before, she would have turned away in shame, remembering all the reasons she’d first opened Grandpa Issu’s last letter to her. Alex was a good test, a precursor to facing Sebastian. To face everything she needed to confess inside, while also facing the honest eyes before her. “Let’s just say, I’m not the good person you think I am. I may even be sparing you a good amount of heartbreak by keeping it to just, I can’t reciprocate your feelings. It might even be the only good I can do you.”

Alex said nothing, sounded nothing. He still watched the snowy space between their feet, but pensive thought clouded his features. With no wind to whisper through the forest’s barren branches, or even to stir the frost or the plumes of their breaths, the silence pricked on. Maybe he’d start crying again, Kutone thought, as Alex squeezed his eyes shut. Unlike past times, the sight made her queasy, but a good kind of queasy—the right, remorseful kind that she never cared to indulge before.

But Alex opened his eyes again. They were dry, but alight with a determined sparkle, as he finally looked up from the ground. “You’ve been friends with me,” he said. “Even though I was a jerk to you, and even though I’m pushing my feelings onto you without thinking about how you might be
feeling, you’re still standing there and listening to me.”

He pulled down the scarf blocking his mouth. “I’m not a smart dude, Kutone, so I’ve no clue what you’re talking about when you say you’re not a good person. Honestly, I don’t give a damn, because right now, you’re being a friend.”

In Kutone’s honest opinion, Alex made no damn sense. First he confessed, then he ripped on Sebastian, then he started crying, and now he called her a friend. Her confusion rippled visibly enough across her features, that Alex nodded and stuck out his hand. “Truce,” he declared. “You broke my heart, and I confused you. We’re equal now, right?”

His rebound from rock-bottom happened so quickly, Kutone, blinking dumbly, soon dissolved into laughter. How very Alex-like, she thought. Busy and sunny. “No truce,” she chuckled. “You’re killing me here.”

Alex withdrew his hand, and crossed his arms. His confident smirk was back like a sun peeking through the clouds. “That’s your loss.”

She wiped away tears with cold fingertips. “Strange. I don’t think I’m missing much.”

“Hey!”

After another chuckle, Kutone went on, her honesty unplugged. “You’re a lot like someone I know,” she said. “Ambitious, confident, but still a sweetheart.” She snickered at Alex’s blush, but her voice dipped into melancholy. “I hurt that someone real bad, Alex. Like, he should never have forgiven me for what I did to him, but he did the same thing as you.”

“Called you a friend?”

She nodded. Maybe she was getting better at this treating-people-right thing. “I think he’ll be okay.”

The sky, she thought, glared white more than blue. Like a pure reflection of the wintry valley, without the noise of people or trees or thoughts or memories. “They’ll find someone perfect for them. You will too. If not already.” She nodded toward the fence around Marnie’s ranch, where Haley had stood before.

A reassured grin lit Alex’s features then, but instead of saying anything, he nudged her out of the forest copse. “I’ll walk you back to your boyfriend,” he teased. “You think he’ll flip?”

“That’s—that’s actually a good question.”

“Time for some experimenting, eh?”

“And you were just shit-talking him.”

“Auto response. I have to be ready to punch the dude’s throat in if he ever hurts you.”

If only Sam or Abigail would say something similar for Sebastian’s sake. Or Robin. Hands in the pockets of her coat, Kutone allowed Alex to throw his arm around her shoulders, as they trudged through the snow toward the rest of the festivities.

Behind them, Demetrius stepped out of the shadows. His stony expression held the same undertones as Alex’s first words: You and I need to talk.
She rather liked the Festival of Ice, capturing quaint country life in a way so different than any winter festival back in the city. Sure, the city had street vendors and ice rinks, maybe a few pony rides and reindeer petting zoos, and she definitely missed the freshly-made donut holes with drizzles of sugar and chocolate glaze, but the Festival of Ice embodied everything that made Pelican Town, well, Pelican Town.

After passing Robin, chisel carving an intricate buttress to her icy castle, as well as Leah alternating between snow and water to smooth out the curves and engrave the scales on her Snow Syren, Alex pointed across the frozen lake to Sam and Sebastian. “Delivered safe and sound,” he said. “Just don’t fall into the holes the mayor opened up, alright?”

It might be a suitable end for her, Kutone thought, but Sam kept an eagle eye out for his best friend’s feelings. Alex raced off through the snow to join Haley, as Sam snorted, “Town jock’s all friendly with you, huh?”

“He was one of the first people to talk to me,” replied Kutone. “Not nearly as charming as my boyfriend, though.”

If he were bothered by Alex before, Sebastian never showed it, and expertly saved himself, fitting a cigarette between his lips and cupping the open flame of his lighter as he lit the end. The soft firelight hid the embarrassed flush of his features, even under Sam’s teasing scrutiny. “You and your silver tongue,” he muttered.

“And you,” Sam snickered, “fell in love with that. Man is Abby missing a good one here.” Laughing at Sebastian’s shove, Sam nodded to the frozen lake. “You’re joining the competition, right? Give old Willy a run for his money?”

Kutone stepped off the ice, and stood close enough to Sebastian he could place an arm around her waist. Not that he would, of course, given Sam right next to him, and the entire town gathered in the forest. Plus, Demetrius made his way across the snow, stopping once with Robin, then with Maru building a snowman, before stopping and turning toward them.

He waved, prompting a long sigh from Kutone. “I might end up missing it,” she replied. “Seems like everyone wants to hang out with me today.”

Sebastian’s voice fell to a hard whisper. “Demetrius isn’t harassing you, is he?”

She would have chosen different words, something along the lines of No, he’s harassing me about me, for your sake, but Kutone diffused Sebastian’s ire instead. “Just worried, I think,” she said. “I haven’t socialized much since winter came, y’know?”

“Kutone, he’s just standing there like he knows you’re gonna head over right now to talk to him.”

He grasped the sleeve of her parka. “What’s he picking on you about now? And don’t lie to me.”

_Oh, honey, if only I could tell you everything right now..._ But as Sam frowned with concern, Kutone chuckled. “He’s not picking on me. Don’t worry too much.”

“I know what he says about people he doesn’t know.” Sebastian loosened his grip, as he stared at the ground. “I remember what he said about you—he doesn’t get where you’re coming from.”

“Oh yeah,” Sam agreed, “I heard about what happened back before you two were a thing. Demetrius, what a tool, am I right? You should have heard what he used to say about me!”

Turning to face Sebastian, Kutone slid her gloved hands up, and pressed her palms against his chilled ears as she smiled. “Sometimes, a little skepticism is healthy. I just have to prove he can trust me.”
He just needed to know she could be a good person for his step-son. Of course, believing the exact opposite herself, Kutone knew she faced an insurmountable wall. Demetrius, already skeptical since autumn, would never approve of her. The facts spoke in her stead.

So she ran her thumbs across Sebastian’s cheeks, and murmured to him, “Believe in me, okay? That’s all I need you to do.”

At Lewis’s call, viewers of and participants in the ice fishing competition gathered around the frozen lake, while Demetrius and Kutone strolled south toward the shore of the river. Demetrius led the way, beckoning Kutone to cross the bridges to Arrowhead Island, where he stopped once the trees blocked their view of the festivities. Expression severe, he crossed his arms and turned his gaze toward the flowing river. Kutone, on the other hand, dug her hands into her pockets, as she braced herself for his judgment.

“You were rather kind to Alex, don’t you think?”

Here goes. There really was no point to arguing the facts. She shrugged. “What was I supposed to do? Tell him ‘fuck off with your feelings’ and make him even more uncomfortable?”

Demetrius shook his head, his features still dark with consternation. “Miss Kutone,” he started, “you remember I said I’d keep my eye on you. Maru’s bright future isn’t my only concern.”

“Sebastian, right?”

“He isn’t…” Demetrius sighed here, and slowed his speech, carefully picking his words. “He hasn’t faced reality like you have.” At Kutone’s testing glance, Demetrius turned, facing her like a wall. “He’s still naïve. Still unaware of how badly the real world could break him.”

He squared his shoulders under the padding of his blue coat, and pulled a troubled expression. “I know he doesn’t see me as his father. Given our situation, it’s to be expected. But I’m also aware of his shortcomings. I’m worried about him. You, frankly, have seized him in a way that worries me, especially given your history.”

She slowly processed the words. Seized him. Like a viper sinking its fangs into the neck of a rabbit. Injected the squirming thing with a venom that made the rabbit docile, subservient, willing to crawl down the snake’s maw and satiate its hunger. Kutone could already feel herself deflating. “You dug around about me, didn’t you?”

Demetrius produced a small notebook from an inner pocket of his coat. “It took some negotiating,” he replied. “Young insisted you’ve done no wrong, and wouldn’t offer anything else about you.”

Rhei didn’t break? Huh. He finally pulled through on his word. Sure, Demetrius was an overprotective father, not an office superior. Yet, knowing Rhei had kept his word, had followed through on his vow to change—that progress made her inwardly smile.

“I did manage to get in touch with someone who claimed to be your friend before. What she said about you…” Demetrius fiddled with the corners of his notebook. Unease and disbelief made him stare at the cover.

“Oh,” said Kutone, aware of her extremities numbing. “Jaci, huh?”

“So you’re still keeping in touch with her? Did she lie about you dropping all of your contacts?”
“No. In fact, I’d love to know how’s she continuing her smear campaign against me.”

“She did admit to spreading the initial rumor that cost you your job.” Demetrius read from his notebook, like a detective’s bullet points from a case. “But you never recovered from the incident. You’ve had how many partners in the two years since that demotion?”

Kutone shrugged. “I’d need to borrow your hands and feet to count.”

“And how many affairs were you courting at the same time?”

“As many as my mental schedule let me.”

“You did these knowingly?”

“Affairs can never be ‘on accident,’ Demetrius. Whoever says that is full of shit.”

Demetrius held a pained expression, as though he were nursing a migraine. “I tried making sense of it. I truly did. Purposely sleeping around, drinking—I figured that was your coping mechanism.”

“Revenge tactic,” Kutone corrected. “Probably also a figurative suicide?”

“Because you lost everything.” Demetrius shut his notebook, and glared down at nonchalant Kutone. “You should have known none of it would have ended well for you.”

“I got what I wanted,” Kutone snorted, meeting his glare with a dead look of her own. “Look, I’m clean. I’m healthy—Harvey’s done his tests and check-ups. I took my precautions and broke the hearts of those who wouldn’t respect me the same way.”

“And you plan to do the same to Sebastian, when?”

Never. Tell him, never! Half of her believed her words, but the other half faced the facts. Those enumerated accusations did indeed happen. Her path of carnage left many a sad sod behind her, and heaven forbid Demetrius knew she used to enjoy that power. “Sebastian,” she hissed, “is the one good thing in my life I don’t want to break. I ended the old me when I moved here, so I’m not going back to what I did to those people!”

“Kutone. You assaulted your superior—who also happened to be your lover at the time—and then cheated on him that very same night. I may be splitting hairs over something that’s been done and already dealt with, but how do you expect me to trust you? At all?”

The numbness in her fingertips and toes ballooned through her whole body. Had Rhei talked? No, no he wouldn’t—he might have been a yes-man slimeball before, but he’d never disclosed their private relations during those six months they’d hidden it together, and even in the two years since they split. So how the hell did Jaci get that information? Had she become a tabloid reporter after Rhei kicked her from the position she stole from Kutone?

But that question of “who” became one directed at a loud crunch in the snow, the sound of dead weight falling into the wintry cushion. Demetrius took one glance, pocketed his notebook, and laid a firm clamp on Kutone’s shoulder. “You two will need some time about this,” he muttered, and trudged back toward the festival.

He brushed past Sebastian, seated in the snow with a dazed expression. Gently ruffling the boy’s dark hair, Demetrius held a pained grimace. “I’m sorry, Sebastian. Face it as best as you can.”

Maybe, Kutone thought, watching Demetrius’s blue coat join the rest of the town crowd, she should
be thankful. Demetrius had provided this opportunity, accelerated as it was, and really, relief dampened her aggravation at Demetrius’s impromptu interrogation. But Sebastian—poor Sebastian—no longer had that cold fortitude that had supported him for so long. Like ice melting in the sun, he’d lost the strength to even look her in the eye.

Yet, in Kutone, realizing that, yes, Sebastian was fragile about a woman with experience, a numbing frost permeated deeper. This was the consequence of honesty, of facing herself. Better to lose him with the truth, than keep him with a lie.

She spared him her gaze. “He confronted me,” she started, “because he saw Alex confessing to me.”

He frowned, confused and skeptical. “Because the town jock has everything to do with this conversation.”

“I could have slept with him.”

And there it was, that struck expression like she’d taken a knife and rammed it into his chest.

She drove it deeper. “And I could have done it so quietly, you’d have no reason to suspect, except for Alex being so obvious about it.”

“I don’t…” His confusion hardened into disbelief, as he clenched his hands together. He gripped hard enough that his knuckles seemed even paler than the snow permeating through his pants. “I don’t get it. I don’t believe you.”

With a smirk, Kutone murmured on. “Demetrius is legitimately looking out for you, you know. He knows what I did to Rhei.”

“No.” Sebastian held a grimace painful enough to look like he was nursing a headache. “No—that’s the thing, isn’t it? Demetrius doesn’t know—about Rhei, about your work situation, about everything—!”

“He figured it out,” Kutone corrected. “And not just Rhei, Sebastian. Others. Boys. Girls. Whoever thought they were in love with me—I played them.”

“But not—!” Distress had drained the color from Sebastian’s features. “Not cheating on them. Sleeping around? You’re not that kind of person—I know you’re not!”

“You don’t.”

She’d been looking up at the sky, and contemplating the whiteness and grayness of it. What she remembered perceiving as blindingly bright just a few minutes ago, now held the same dreary tones as the sky in the old cityscape. She knew this consequential silence well. But unlike other times Kutone had given this similar speech—to too many others to count anymore—Sebastian’s silence, a deathly, murdered kind of quiet, lodged a hulking wedge of regret in Kutone’s throat. If only she hadn’t been so stupid before. If only she’d made the right choices before!

If only she hadn’t known, that the simplicity and surety of her words would destroy her good image in Sebastian’s eye.

“You don’t know me,” she echoed. “I told you, didn’t I, that I’m the worst for this kind of thing? For the concept of ‘us’?”

Sebastian opened his mouth. Sounded out the first syllable of her name, but choked on the rest. He might as well have thrown up. While he wasn’t about to cry, he wasn’t going to recover readily,
either.

And again, unlike other times, Kutone wasn’t sure she would either. She rather liked Sebastian seeing her as a good person, but… “There you go, I guess. That’s why I can’t kiss you.” She had to look at him, his eyes down on the snowy ground, hands still tightly clenched. An unconscious smile flickered across her lips, as she said, reassuringly, “Cigarettes taste better than dirty skanks.”

He finally looked up. Released his hands and stood up, gritting his teeth. “You can’t—why would you smile about that?”

“I guess…” It really sucked to have her character dragged through the mud, but at the same time, her shoulders felt lighter. Sebastian’s judgment dragged her stomach down like a lead weight, but Alex finally made sense to her. “I guess it feels good to finally get it off my chest.” She trudged past him, eyes averted from him, and avoiding contact with him. “Demetrius wasn’t lying or picking on me. Take it as you will.”

His expression, shattered, disbelieving, put her on the cusp of a cathartic revelation, in the bitterest way possible. She decided to go home. To take a boiling hot shower and scrub her skin until her pores bled. To sleep long and hard and dream nightmares of Sebastian’s spurning rebuke. It was about time she paid what she owed, right?

“I’ll give you some space,” she said, voice trembling. “And don’t worry. You don’t have to come back.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm really worried that this debacle feels contrived. Could be my way of writing it, so I may go back to revise the Demetrius confrontation, but as it stands, this is the trajectory the story is currently following. I'll do my best to work with what I have, at least until I can think of something better.

Ugh. I feel bad that this is the chapter I'm sending you guys, but for now, this is the best I've got. I promise I'll make up for it the next chapter.

You can find me at my tumblr to give me some suggestions on how I can improve this particular arc.
If you heard a distressed squealing in the distance beyond your visible horizon... that was probably my internal screaming this entire day. It is still Friday, so it looks like I'm still on time, so, here, have a chapter.

As of writing these notes, I have updated the ending of the last chapter so it's a bit more up to my liking! Thanks to all who left those critiques--y'all saved me big time.

And keep doing that, readers! Comment, critique, gush, leave kudos, bookmark it--whatever you guys do is sweet, juicy feedback for me, and keeps me going with this project. Thank you always for your love!

Were someone to ask him point-blank, Sebastian would say the season around his birthday was always, and inevitably, pretty shit.

Sam had lectured him before about vibes—advice likely from Emily at the Saloon—that Sebastian’s closed-off, brooding, secretive vibes always attracted the negatives. Shit begets shit, or something like that. “I’m not saying,” Sam had said, “that the shit you perceive as shitty is your fault. What I am saying, is that maybe it’s not you versus the universe?”

“I never said it was me versus the universe,” Sebastian had once reasoned, “and I don’t choose to be this way, either.”

Logic and realism were his magic and dagger: it was the only arsenal Sebastian could ever brag about. In a recently short time, he’d started adding patience and understanding to that arsenal, if Kutone’s allegations—you’re always so sweet to me—held any water. Unfortunately, Demetrius—the truth—had ripped a hole into whatever held Kutone together, and she suddenly held nothing.

Affairs. Assault. Demetrius had accused Kutone of only those two things, but the volume of each accusation, added to Kutone’s own confession, made up for their thin quantity. Assault, especially on Rhei, Sebastian had already forgiven. Who wouldn’t, after all, if their boss intentionally or unintentionally used them as a scapegoat? But affairs…

As many as my mental schedule let me... I could have slept with him.

Winter bit needle-sharp down in the basement, but Sebastian neither shivered or numbed. Jumbled, crammed thoughts insulated his mind from the cold, which only pricked back into his consciousness when Kutone’s words snaked through him again.

Don’t worry. You don’t have to come back.

Why hadn’t he grabbed her then, when she trudged back through the snow and ignored the announcement for the festival’s fishing competition? Why had he said nothing, when Demetrius had sat the family down later in the evening, and said once again, “I don’t believe we should trust Kutone anymore,” and when his mother had angrily clicked her tongue and slammed her palm onto the table—I’ve had enough of your opinions on my friend, Demetrius! Think what you like about her, she’s
one girl who’s been hurt so badly, so no matter what you say about her, I won’t have this talk again! He’d been glad for his mother’s steadfast defense, and a part of him sided with her, but Sebastian had said nothing.

You don’t know me.

Another part of him, some stupidly romantic part of him, had shattered like ice taking a sledgehammer. Why? He’d known, given Kutone’s history with Rhei, she had more relationship experience than Sebastian could ever fathom. And, base as the thought was, a girl who knows she’s pretty, knows how to get around. So, affairs—purposeful affairs—that seemed like something normal real-world adults went through at some point in their lives. Had Kutone told him—

Oh.

He sat upright on his bed.

Oh.

Because she hadn’t told him. Because she’d kept that secret to herself, in some attempt to protect him. Because, she’d said instead, “Cigarettes taste better than dirty skanks,” and said it smiling—because she’d pushed him away from her hurt, instead of relying on his newfound patience and understanding.

That’s why he didn’t know, and that’s what killed him, that even after the times he’d listened to her, held her close, acquiesced to her wish that they not kiss or sleep together, he still knew nothing about her. He still had to gain his insight of her through someone as painfully spiteful as Demetrius.

He still didn’t have the courage to ask about what hurt her the most.

He still had no right to tell her, “I love you.”

But the echo of those words lately permeated deeper in his chest, deeper than any good cigarette he’d had in his life. What to do?

How do I get her to open up to me?

A rapid series of knocks tapped at his door. Multiple fists, and annoying ones at that, accompanied with Sam’s, “Eeeey, birthday boy! Open up!” that actually induced a gag in Sebastian as he rolled off his bed and sauntered toward his door. Throwing it wide open, he found Abigail, Sam, and Maru, all grinning brightly—wickedly—and crammed into the doorway.

Maru held a laminated box over her head.

He’d barely started reading it, when Sam and Abigail seized him by his arms and pushed him back inside. “We’ll spare you the formalities!” said Sam, “But consider this a surprise from us, you—holy Yoba above, why are you living in a freezer box?”

“Helps me think sometimes.”

As Abigail and Maru scampered back up the steps to retrieve a space heater—likely one that Maru modified—Sebastian read the title on the box, left on his game table. “Desert Serenade?” He couldn’t make sense of Sam’s grin. “Wait. This isn’t—is it?”

“Well, yeah, we were only nerding out about it when the announcements came out.”
“But it’s limited edition. The price tag on it—no one had the income here—!”

“Maru’s idea,” replied Sam, as Maru and Abigail came back down the steps, lugging a heater between them. Maru sheepishly smiled and adjusted her glasses at the mention of her name. “We split it four ways and decided this is what we’d do for your birthday this year.”

“Four ways?” Sebastian echoed. Sam, Abigail, Maru, and—maybe—most likely…

Abigail, after plugging in the heater and switching on the power, stood up and shed her coat. “Kutone took care of a large chunk of it,” she said. “So it really should have been her handing you the box, but she just wouldn’t tag along!”

“Yeah,” Maru added, clasping her hands. “I tried, Sebastian, I really did. I knew you’d like her to join too, but all she said was that she’d come by later, if she finished her errands on time.”

“So I said,” Sam chimed in, momentarily oblivious of Sebastian’s conflicted grimace, “that we’d make her regret not showing up, by having a blast of a campaign. Abby’s doing DM today so you can kick back, relax, and enjoy the story.”

It’s a good fuck-you, thought Sebastian. More than that, though, it would be a good thank-you, to have fun with a present she helped with, and tell her about it later. He picked up the game’s sealed box from the table, and after a few tries, peeled off the plastic wrap. “Maru, you’re joining too?”

“Um!” She took an apprehensive step back, and her usually bright expression faded. “If—if you’d be okay with it. I’ve always wanted to try, but if you’d rather I not be here, I can just leave!”

“Don’t—I mean—I think.” Having this much trouble talking to his own sister, no wonder he couldn’t push back when she shoved him away. Besides that, Maru hadn’t deserved a lot of those childhood fights. And still, she kept trying to be his sister.

He needed to be a better brother, a better person. Maru could teach him how to do so.

Sebastian waved Maru over. “Come on, Maru. It’ll be fun with all of us. As long as Sam doesn’t screw up the campaign.”

“That’s my role,” Sam snorted, pounding a fist into Sebastian’s shoulder. “I shake things up around here.”

_Not as much as Kutone, Sebastian inwardly replied, but I’ll take what I can get._

Your past valorous efforts in defeating the necromancer Xarth, and recovering the Solarion Staff for the benefit of the Solar King and his people, have made you into a scion, a hero, for the kingdom of Solaria. Peace should have reigned, but a desperate envoy of the kingdom has alerted you, that the realm needs your fortitude once again. The King’s court dancer, a veiled, mysteriously bewitching bard known only as Serenata, has stolen the staff, and disappeared into the wastelands of the Entombing Desert. No advisor or sage can guess Serenata’s motivations, but the task of finding out has been entrusted to you as well.

Samson is your brother-in-arms, a veteran warrior you’ve learned to trust with your life. Your sister, Himaru, will be joining you for the first time as your cleric. You will need to guide and heed her in the trials ahead. Serenata is wily as she is beguiling, and you will need every sense and resource you have available to resist this temptress.
You start your journey at the very edges of the Entombing Desert. It is deep night, cold, but the stars twinkle warmly above you. You, as a shadow diviner, feel most at home in this darkness. While Samson and Himaru stoke the fires and prepare camp for the evening, you venture to the outer edges of the firelight.

One particular “star” captures your interest. Bright, globular, like a staring reptilian eye, it hangs over the center of the desert, or what you believe from maps and briefings, is the center. The eye appeared days after Serenata stole the staff, and its visage has made all beholders anxious for the coming days.

Himaru joins you as you watch the eye over the desert. “Michalis,” she starts, “in a dancer’s hands, what could the Staff do?”

You’ve seen the royal court dancer during the King’s banquets, and through your eyes as a diviner, Serenata has shown no proof of magical knowledge. Her dances, in whirling silks, tinkling bells, spinning tresses of auburn hair, certainly prove her caliber, but, “The Staff would do nothing for her,” you reply. “She has no magic to amplify.”

“Young, when we do face her, she’ll be facing us as she is.”

Samson groans from their campfire. “We’re basically bullying her at this point. I think we should just clock her in the head and let the King deal with her.”

You turn a smirk toward Samson. “You be sure to do that before she charms you into dancing with her.”

Himaru, adjusting her glasses higher up her nose bridge, flips through a lexicon strapped to her side. “Charms can be performed without magic?”

You give your sister a pat on her head. “Think of it this way,” you explain, “Serenata is a world-class dancer who can command an entire audience, without using magic—that’s why the King appointed her as a royal entertainer. Then, when you have someone like Samson getting hearts in his eyes when he sees a pretty girl—”

“You shut your trap, Michalis.”

“Just stating facts.”

But it is a worrying thought. Should Serenata beguile Samson, you’ll be at a severe disadvantage. Himaru, though continuing her accelerated studies at the campfire, likely won’t be able to free Samson from any trance with her still-developing clerical talent. And you can hardly budge Samson in an arm wrestling match, let alone withstand a blow from his claymore.

The keys to taking back the Staff this time, you decide, will be discretion, and speed. You still can’t make sense of the eye-like star above the desert, but the foreboding pressure of limited time clenches your stomach.

The night passes, opening into a pressing, prickly dawn. Shouldering your shadowy cloak as it billows in the wind, you decide to take advantage of the cool desert morning, and begin your trek across the dunes. Himaru keeps her nose planted in her tome, while Samson spins tall tales and fantasies about the times he’s seen Serenata at court.

You’re considering casting a silencing spell over him, by the time the noon sun blazes high overhead. The sands of the unforgiving desert mirror the sun, driving you and your companions into a slow crawl. Himaru warns you of sunstroke, as your steps begin to waver.
Samson keeps you on your feet, with a hard tug on your arm. “You keep forgetting you’re allergic to the sun, my friend. Let’s get you to cover.”

Himaru chooses an outcrop of old ruins ahead on your path. You draw your hood tighter over your head, and with Samson’s help, stagger into the shade. “We can’t—we don’t have the time,” you gasp, “we have to keep moving.”

Samson takes Himaru’s lexicon, as she steps away to gather water, and awkwardly fans it over you. “We travel at night,” he states, “whether you like it or not, ‘cause I’m not carrying you across this sandbox.”

“We’re limited on water too,” Himaru adds, “and I want to save what power I can for when we find Serenata. Oh, but!” She gestures deeper into the shaded ruins. “I’ve found something down that way!”

“Something?”

“Pictures—hieroglyphs, I think, and they look very similar to that star over the desert.”

You grab Samson by his arm and pull yourself up. This may be the answer to the question you’ve been pondering. Ignoring the sweat beading your skin, as well as the tendrils of faded vision thronging at the edges of your sight, you follow your sister into the shaded ruins.

You have enough energy to snap your fingers, summoning a lick of flame at your fingertip, as you venture deeper into the ruins. Your steps echo down the dank, descending tunnel, and the winds outside still reverberate within. A melodic chant harmonizes with the winds—a chant, you realize, you’ve been hearing since beginning your journey across the desert.

Before you mention this to your companions, however, Himaru dashes away, and skids to a halt in front of an ancient mural. You hold your flame higher, casting light on the awesome sight. Even Himaru, usually intrigued by intellectual finds like this, takes an apprehensive step back.

A sun blazes proudly high on the mural, and within it, an eye—much like the star outside over the desert—gazes upon an altar below it. Caricatures of people, with a central veiled and crowned feminine figure, dance around the altar, surrounded by rippling sands and curved spires stretching toward the sun. You follow the line of the spires, shortening in height until it ends with an upturned reptilian skull, open jaws facing toward the sun.

This is undoubtedly the ritual Serenata plans to emulate, but to what end?

Samson points to wing-like appendages on the fringes of the caricatured ritual. “What if this is a dead dragon?” he starts. “I mean, this place’s called the Entombing Desert, right?”

You have nothing to say against his statement. Your silence has Samson paling in your firelight, while Himaru passes a confused expression between you and your best friend. “What if,” you add, “you’re right, Samson, and Serenata’s planning to resurrect a dragon that might be entombed here?”

“Hey now, I was half-joking.”

Himaru turns back to the mural, and passes her fingertips across the image against the stone. “Can we fight a dragon?”

You’ve enough sense to know, no, you stand no chance against a dragon. You still try to scramble up a strategy, but the shuffle and heavy footfall of a marching detail interrupts your thoughts. Samson brandishes his claymore, as you, hands clouding black with dancing shadows, shield Himaru behind
“The dancer’s lovestruck guards, eh?” Samson taunts. “I was wondering when the minions would show up!”

You’re surrounded, but Samson crashes into the bristling guards with an infectious gusto. Sandy cloaks fly apart and pained yelps echo through the mural chamber as his claymore flashes in your firelight. The guards rally each other as they rush you and Himaru, but with a flick of your wrist, shadows erupt and ensnare your assailants. Another flick, and you throw aside your enemies. Still more charge at you, but with a pivot and arcing sweep, a wave of darkness shoves them back.

Samson’s at your side in the next instant, back against yours as Himaru chants over her staff. “Pushovers, all of them,” he snorts. “It’s almost scary how easy this is.”

And upon closer inspection of your assailants, the guards show no signs of charming. They beset you and your companions with angry glares, but their rallying cries are not the vacant shouts of those under a charm.

“Hold them for as long as you can, men!” they shout to each other.

“Give Lady Serenata the time she needs to complete the ritual!”

“Relief will come to us all soon—hold fast!”

Himaru casts another ward over you and Samson, as she whispers urgently, “These are regular men and women, not even remotely strengthened by Serenata’s dances!”

Samson blocks and kicks aside another guard. “What does that even mean?!”

“They’re following her of their own free will,” you reply.

“Meaning they must have a reason for doing so!” Himaru adds. “We should try to talk to them!”

A guard smashes into a shadowy barrier you hastily pull forth, as you argue back, “When they’re the ones who attacked first?”

“I’m with Michalis on this!” Samson roars. “Hit first, ask later!”

“But I think—!”

You yank Himaru to the ground, just as a fireball sails overhead and smashes into the mural. “What was that about talking to them, Himaru?”

“I’m not going to kill them when they must have a reason for fighting us!”

Samson suddenly sheathes his weapon and throws both you and Himaru over his shoulders. “Luckily we’re not about to worry about that,” he snorts, “or a sibling rivalry for that matter—we’re hauling ass!”

Boots pounding into the ground, Samson rushes through a hole in the guards’ formation, and dashes deeper into the ruins. He doesn’t get far, as his combined weight with you and Himaru unsteadies his footing. He skids, he stumbles, and he plunges all three of you underground. You have no time to shout curses, as a river of sand carries you away like a coracle stuck in a current. You black out.

Then how much time has passed? Sand should have suffocated you, you think, but you’re spitting it out instead. You taste clean, open air, unlike the musty cave air from the mural chamber. You
awaken to sunset glowing red through the cracks of a high cave ceiling, as well as the sound of Himaru’s conversational tone.

“I see. So everyone here has the same sickness…”

You struggle upright, sand flaking out of your hair and clothes as you survey your surroundings. You’re still underground, but at an oasis, surrounded by haphazard tents and small campfires. More of the people in sandy cloaks, docile this time, congregate at the water’s edge, or with Himaru, tome open in her lap, and her quill pen flying across the page.

Samson stops you before you raise your voice at her. “Some important information here,” he says. “Leave it to Himaru.”

Your sister murmurs back and forth with the members of the underground village, her expression darkening with concern the more she continues with them. “But, by Serenata taking that staff, our people will suffer too…”

“But,” you hear one of the villagers respond, “she can end ours, and then return the staff to your people. That was her plan the entire time.”

Himaru stops writing, and casts an alarmed glance back to you and Samson. “Return the staff?” she echoes. “Meaning we never had to come look for her?”

A matronly voice responds next. “Oh, no, I’d say I’m rather glad you and your people came all this way. You can return word to your king about how we suffer here. We lack food, we’re all very sick and very much need any help we can get.”

“Not to mention,” adds a young man, “Lady Serenata’s been a bit distant from us, y’know? After she began the ritual, she’s just not who she was before.”

The ritual. You so badly want to ask further, but Samson holds you down by the shoulder. You must depend on Himaru to find the answers to your questions.

“When you say ‘distant,’ do you mean she hasn’t talked to any of you since she began the ritual?”

“Frightening, isn’t it? She began dancing and it’s as though she’s been seized by it. It’s a sight, for sure—the staff floating there in the middle of the altar, Serenata dancing around it and this ancient voice speaking and singing to her, like their own little duet… Her feet must be so tired, and she must be so hungry and thirsty, but she keeps dancing.”

Samson leans over, whispering, “The altar they’re talking about is literally above our heads. You’re welcome.”

You nod in response, as Himaru tries one more question. “We saw a mural on our way here,” she starts, “of a dancer at an altar, and an eye in the sun.”

An elderly voice answers next. “Ah, that’s an old legend, of the Solar Wyrm.” You turn the entirety of your attention to the veiled elder, as he continues. “This Entombing Desert is the resting place of that dire beast. When its skeletal remains have tasted the nectar of the sun, it shall awaken to devour the entire fruit from the sky, plunging the world into eternal night. Until then, it watches over its remains, driving off all who would disturb its rest.

“And our tribe,” the elder laughs, “is all descendants of those who have been punished. That’s why we’re all so sick. And that mural,” the elder continues, “is a depiction of the dance to uphold the seal on the Solar Wyrm. Lady Serenata has promised to strengthen the seal, in return for her use of the
altar.”

Or, you concede, to weaken the seal and release the Solar Wyrm. Solarion Staff in hand, Serenata could potentially awaken the legendary beast. But to what end? Why would a court dancer choose to awaken a dragon fabled to someday eat the sun?

Himaru bows in gratitude to the villagers, and shuffles back to you and Samson. You’ve never seen her features so grave. “Michalis,” she says, “I think Serenata’s trying to destroy herself.”

This isn’t the conclusion you were expecting to hear. But before you can ask further, Himaru pulls both you and Samson to your feet, and drags you toward the steps, the apparent exit to the surface. “Serenata is originally from this region!” Himaru explains. “She’s afflicted with the same sickness as the villagers here—sun poisoning, which turns the blood into pure solar essence and eventually burns its victims from inside out—and she only agreed to be the King’s court dancer in exchange for his help with the region’s sickness!”

She lets go of you at the base of the steps, and hugs her tome close, her tone desperate. “But the King got caught up in the skirmish with Xarth, and couldn’t afford to give Serenata the aid she needed. So she’s dealing with the situation herself.” She snaps her attention to you. “Sun poisoning, Michalis! Even if Serenata herself has no magic, solar essence is!”

“And the Solarion Staff can amplify that essence,” you finish. “She becomes the sun the Solar Wyrm will devour.”

Samson frowns. “And that’s supposed to help the rest of the people here?”

“If by devouring the sun,” you explain, “the Wyrm casts night over the world, what would happen to sun poisoning itself, if the Wyrm devours someone afflicted by the disease?” And even if that’s too hopeful, “What if, like any living creature, the Wyrm isn’t immune to sun poisoning? What if you can kill a dragon using the same illness it’s said to afflict?”

After a few moments’ thought, understanding dawns in Samson’s features. “Oh,” he sighs. “Oh, shit, no, Michalis. We’ve got to stop her! There’s gotta be a different way she can handle that problem!”

Himaru nods. “Brother, please. We’ll stop Serenata and take back the Staff, but let’s please do it in a way that’ll save her!”

You have no reason to argue against either of your companions, and follow them the rest of the way up the stairs.

You emerge onto the surface, the desert heat already prickling against your skin as you face a ceremonial dais. The eye—which you now know as the Solar Wyrm’s eye—glows ominously above, and much like the mural in the chamber, curved spires flank a path toward the dais. A giant skull, pointed, reptilian, lies with its vacant eyes and open maw turned toward the sky.

Samson points toward the altar. “Look,” is all he breathes, the urgency in his voice fading.

Serenata, the court dancer, mesmerizes you just as you remember from her services to the Solar King. The tresses of her dark hair flow in the desert breeze, her scarlet silks trailing behind her every step, turning her into a moving current of bronze and crimson. Bells on her ankles sing with her steps and spins, while her hands and fingers curve and stretch toward the sky, the horizon, around her body, as she pivots on the balls of her toes into the next step of her dance.

Her steps take her around the glimmering Solarion Staff, each pulse of its light flaring bright tracks of vessels across her body. With each pulse, beads of sweat roll down her face, creased in pain.
You watch her, and you know, she dances to destroy herself. You give Samson’s tunic a hard tug and take Himaru by her hand, as you race up the bordered path.

In a lull of her dance, Serenata opens her eyes, radiant gold like the sun, and focuses on your ascent. “The King,” she sighs, her voice resigned, exhausted, “is too late with his aid.”

Samson unsheathes his claymore, and with one mighty leap, crashes down onto the brick face of the dais. While Serenata leaps out of his way, Samson pulls his weapon free and extends his hand to the dancer. “Don’t make me hurt that pretty face,” he urges. “We can help you.”

She presses her palms to her face, and as another pulse from the Solarion Staff rolls through her and illuminates the blood vessels across her body, she shakes her head. “How can you look at me like this,” she replies, “and say something so profoundly false?”

Himaru peeks from behind your back and brandishes her staff. “We know you’re trying to help your people!” she argues. “But this isn’t the way to do it!”

Serenata reaches behind her, and pulls a dagger from her sash. “I’m almost finished here,” she says. “And when everything ends here, I’ve asked the villagers to return the staff. It’s only for a little while longer, I promise.”

Speed and discretion, you remind yourself, and with shadows swirling in your palms, you run at the dancer. Your shadows crash against a burst of light from her palm—this, you understand, is your expertise. Light and Shadow, Void and Solar. “Get the Staff out of here!” you call to Samson, and begin your duel with Serenata.

Her movements flow like a dance—you’re matching her like a partner. As quickly as you’re able to call forth the darkness to ensnare her steps, she pivots to another stance, and crashes her overwhelming light against your body. Her knife threatens to end you in her every thrust, but you, grasping the rhythm of her movement, duck or step out of her way. Himaru wards you when she can, while Samson struggles to wrench the Solarion Staff free from its floating spot.

It’s a deadly dance, you realize, but as you watch Serenata’s shining eyes, you see her pain, in the tears welling and restrained at the corners of her eyes, in the sweat against her neck and temples, in her heavy breath under the veil against her face. For her sake, you must dance with her, must take her light in stride with your shadow, to stop her from destroying the smiles you remember from the King’s court. Your own smile, from watching her enrapture so many. “You have to come back,” you say to her, in a moment where you’ve locked each other. “You can’t do this to yourself, to all those people believing in you.”

“What people?” she whispers back, and breaks your lock. “The people underground? They don’t even realize I’m lying to them. The people at court, with their vapid affections and ears ignorant of my calls for help?” Anger becomes power in her next blow, knocking you down to one knee. “Who are you talking about?! The King only sent you now because I took his precious treasure, not to answer my pleas!”

In the moment you heave back against her, she produces a throwing knife from her sash, and hurls it into Samson’s shoulder. He flinches and yelps at the embedded blade, but another, then another sink into his leg. He crashes onto the floor as both you and Himaru run to his aid.

Serenata points her dagger at you, and lightly clasps the handle of the Solarion Staff. “Just leave me be,” she says, and with a gentle tug down, sinks the end of the staff into a small divet in the dais.

The light of the staff rolls through the ground, through the dancer’s body, through the curved spires
flanking the path to the altar, and finally, the skull at the base of the ritual clearing. The ground shakes beneath you. The eye closes, as a shuddering hiss rumbles through the sand.

Himaru, freeing the knives from Samson’s body, stops with her staff over him. “Oh no,” she groans. “Oh no, no, no, this isn’t—is it?”

You stare down the point of the dagger in Serenata’s hand, to the dancer’s tired expression. “It is,” you reply. The sand shifts, the dais tilts, the entire world seems to shift as the curved spires slide beneath the desert, while the skull thrashes, jaws ever open toward the sky.

“Soon,” says the dancer, “it’ll all be over.” She frees the Solarion Staff from the floor, and presses its glowing gem to her chest. “It’s tasted the nectar of the sun. And now…”

The ground heaves one more time, and in a cascade of sand, the Solar Wyrm’s skeleton, ribs, spine, and skeletal wings, splay hungrily open behind Serenata.

She breathes once, shuddering against the smell of rot behind her, and against the pain flaring within her glowing vessels. She smiles. “Now I become the sun, and everything shall end.”

How can she smile about this? How can she be so sad, so pained, and yet smile so beautifully? You open your palms, allowing the shadows to oscillate around you, behind you, within you.

You’ve promised yourself, you won’t let her die.

This story, Sebastian decided, hit too close to home. He cast a grim glance over his character card. Many a Solarion Chronicle session had developed Michalis to the point he could probably handle at least Serenata on her own. As far as compatibility went, he had her at a disadvantage, with her already low statistics as a bard crippling her further.

But Michalis on his own against the Solar Wyrm, while minding both Sam’s and Maru’s characters? While also trying to not kill Serenata? Next to impossible.

With a sigh, Sebastian shook his head at Abigail. “Since when were you such a brutal DM?”

Abigail snorted and relaxed the hand holding her handbook. “Oh, and you’re not? At least I balance the game for the newbie’s sake.”

Maru flinched back to reality. “Sorry!” she squeaked. “I know I’m just holding you guys up.”

“Stop,” Sam chuckled, waving his hand. “We wouldn’t have gotten that information about the boss character if you hadn’t stepped in.”

To this, Sebastian nodded his agreement. “I was too focused on the usual objective to think it through,” he admitted. “You did good, Maru.”

Maru’s disbelief melted into a bright red blush across her features. “It’s—it’s nothing special. It’s just talking to people.”

Abigail pointed the corner of her handbook at Maru. “And that, missy,” she exclaimed, “is the key to properly playing an RPG! You can’t be a bonehead like Sam. ‘Hit first, ask later?’ Shame on you; I thought you were a veteran!”

While Sam struggled to deflect Abigail’s accusations, Sebastian could barely laugh. It’s just talking
to people, he reflected. A woman who turned her body into the sun, to allow a monster to devour her and end the suffering of many.

She didn’t realize, of course, that the end of one suffering could be the beginning of another. His, specifically.

He needed a smoke.

The game had entered a break, anyway. Standing from his seat, Sebastian swiped his box of cigarettes off his computer desk, and sauntered up the steps. He passed the house’s front lobby, darkened for the evening, and left through the front door, muffling his friends’ and sister’s bantering as he stepped out into the wintry night.

After a few steps’ distance from the front door, he slipped the butt of one cigarette between his lips, and lit up. One long drag in, enough for the smoke to cloud the thoughts knotting between his mind and his chest, and he let the knots unravel in his exhale. With his breath, the smoke glowed white for one instant, before dissipating into the cold night, flaking ever so slightly with flecks of snow.

He wondered about her. Thought about what he could say to her to make her look at him. Really look at him. Rely on him. When could he know her? When, and how, could he earn the right to dance with her, as the shadow to her poisoned light?

He turned toward his house, and caught, for the first time, a small package at the foot of the door. Somehow, he already knew, without turning the package in his hands, that Kutone had stopped by and left it for his discovery. Sebastian stepped into the house’s front light, anyway, flipping the package until he found the address and return address in black pen,

*To, You.*

*From, Me.*

Pinching his cigarette between two fingers, he undid the twine with his free hand. The paper crinkled off, revealing a simple gift box. She’d written nothing on the paper, either.

He opened the box.

His cigarette fell from his grasp, and onto the snow-covered ground.

In the light, the crystalline surface and contour of a perfect teardrop glinted beautifully. Sadly. The message inside the gift box, however, handwritten in careful cursive, seized Sebastian’s attention the most.

*Still thinking about you.*

He pressed his hand over his stinging eyes, as he leaned back against the wall of the house. Aches swelled in his chest, so bad he almost couldn’t breathe.

What was that last thing she said, before she’d opened her box of secrets?

*Believe in me, okay? That’s all I need you to do.*

“God, Kutone,” Sebastian murmured, voice catching in the night, “I love you so fucking much.”
For fuck’s sake, if you love her, then love that girl to death.

Why he hadn’t understood Rhei’s admonishment before, Sebastian had no idea. Maybe it was Rhei’s addition of that hypothetical word, “if.” Maybe it was that Sebastian only just come to terms with the fact he liked her, and love, to him, was still a foggy concept. All he perceived at that moment, as he slid Kutone’s gift box into his front pocket, was his overwhelming, nerve-grating need to see her, as though seeing her face, and hearing her voice, would cast his nerves into calm contentedness, which he hadn’t felt in the couple weeks since the Festival of Ice.

So Sebastian had purpose in his step, as he descended the steps into his basement and walked inside. Sam, Abigail, and Maru still kept up lively conversation, their RPG campaign forgotten in their camaraderie. Leave them to it, Sebastian thought, as he grabbed the messenger bag hanging on his wall, and stuffed his essentials inside. Laptop, a change of clothes, charger, cigs.

Only when he shouldered his bag did Sam finally speak up. “Who invited you over for the night?” he shot. “We still have a Solar Wyrm to finish off here!”

“It can wait,” Sebastian replied, earning his friends’ incredulous stares. “Yes, how dare I leave a campaign unfinished. But something important came up.”

Maru smiled. “Is it Kutone?”

Sam’s and Abigail’s boggled expressions relaxed into understanding, as Sebastian absently adjusted the strap of his bag. “I mean,” he started, “it’s still my birthday right now. I can be a little selfish.”

“Ah, young love,” Sam crooned. “Don’t forget the rubber!”

Abigail dug her nails into Sam’s vulnerable cheek, eking out a restrained scream before Sebastian could fully protest. “No guy jokes right now!” she hissed. “Especially in front of Maru!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry—ow, ow, ow, Abby, lemme go!”

Maru, coughing deliberately, stood from her seat as well, joining her brother as he hurried to his door. “Don’t worry about Dad,” she murmured, patting Sebastian on his shoulder. “I’ll make sure Mom covers for you.”

Sebastian paused midway up the steps, then met Maru’s eye. “Weird,” he said. “I wasn’t even thinking about Demetrius right now.”

“I figured,” replied Maru, shrugging. “But you know I can’t lie if he asks me tomorrow. So first thing in the morning, I’ll tell Mom you’re with Kutone. She’ll cover for you like crazy.”

He was out the door, snow falling gently outside, as he chuckled. “For Kutone’s sake, right?”

Maru pushed her glasses up, and wagged her finger. “For both of you,” she corrected. “Now, get! You don’t have long until midnight and your right to be selfish runs out!”

They were talking like regular siblings, like the fights that established the distance between them
those many years ago were finally starting to tide over. That was one less regret to live with. “Thanks Maru,” Sebastian said instead. “I’ll try to be back by evening tomorrow.”

“Do whatever makes you happy, Brother. That’s what matters the most.”

Winter night nipped the cold deep into his fingertips, as well as his nose and cheeks, as Sebastian rounded the corner from the backwoods road, and onto the Banks. While he neither shivered or trembled, nervousness burned in the pit of his gut, as he stepped up onto the porch. No lights shone from inside the house, save for the dimming orange glow of firelight. Surely Kutone hadn’t fallen asleep already?

No, even then, he wouldn’t give up, not when he was so close.

He balled his fist and rapped the door a few times. Don’t call her name, he told himself. Don’t risk her ignoring you at the sound of your voice.

No response. He tried again, knocking harder.

This time, a snuffle sounded behind the door, followed by restrained yips. Good, Oki woke up.

He knocked again, agitating Oki into louder barks.

A light came on inside. Sebastian dropped his fist back into his pocket, as Kutone’s groan answered the dog. Relax, he said to himself. Even if she tries to close the door on you, push your way in. Talk to her. Be honest with her.

“Someone out there?”

He nearly called out to her, upon hearing her thin, apprehensive voice. Kutone, he wanted to tell her, you’re not a woman who talks like that! Swallowing his outburst, however, he knocked one more time.

“Coming, coming.”

The door opened. Warm air wafted out from the crack, as Kutone, sleeplessness hollowing dark circles around her eyes, peeked out. “Oh.” She blinked slowly, and rubbed her eyes, but didn’t close the door. “Sebastian?”

“Can I stay the night with you?”

He held his breath, as Kutone stared vacantly. Several registered thoughts flitted across her features, though he could read none of them. She pursed her lips and inspected the doormat outside. “Are you sure about this?” she responded. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not taking this as forgiveness or understanding or anything similar.”

“You should. But take it as you want. I just want to stay with you tonight.”

Surprise flickered an alertness into her features, as she lifted her eyes from the doormat, to Sebastian’s level gaze. “Won’t Demetrius throw a fit over this?”

“I’ve cared about that, when?”

She pondered a few seconds longer. Then, heaving a preparatory sigh, she opened her door. “Come in.”
From the cold and his eagerness, he had to stop himself from stumbling after her. But unshouldering his bag, he closed the front door behind him. The warmth of Kutone’s house nestled against his winter-numbed extremities.

A different kind of welcoming graced the house at night, Sebastian realized, like it playfully, yet gently, invited him to the myriad secrets of its owner. Settling his bag into the cushion of Kutone’s couch, he sat on the plush himself, slipping out of his shoes saturated by frost. Oki nosed his shoes for a moment, before offering his furry head for a rub under his ears. As a reward for waking Kutone, Sebastian treated the retriever to a rub under his chin as well, before Oki ambled sleepily back to his mat, and flopped down.

“Did you want any coffee?”

With the light on in the kitchen, Kutone had opened one of her cupboards, and reached up for a mug. She clearly strained to reach, prompting Sebastian to leave his seat and stride to a position behind her. Setting his hand on her shoulder, he gently pressed her down and easily reached the mug she’d struggled to get. “Cocoa would be better, I think,” he replied. “Light on the sugar.”

She nodded, but remained still for a moment. Her shoulder, Sebastian thought, felt so small and thin against his palm. “Can you get one more, then?”

He took down one more mug, setting both on the countertop. Her hand came up and grasped him around his upper arm. “I’m so glad,” she started, “that you’re here.”

“I’m glad you let me in.”

The tension melted from her shoulders, even as she clung tightly to his arm. Cocoa could wait, he thought, as he guided her back to the couch. He sat down first, before he pulled her into his lap.

She held her breath in the same instant she found herself straddling him, but Sebastian kept his grasp firm around her fingertips. “Relax,” he said. “I just want to be close to you.”

“I don’t—this is—you do realize how compromising this is, don’t you?”

Unwrapping his hand from hers, he pressed his palms against her waist. “Talk to me,” he whispered. “You know I’m here to listen to you.”

“There’s just some things I shouldn’t—!”

“Talk to me.” She smelled good, he thought, like silky linen. Milky smooth. “Tell me what’s on your mind, so I don’t have to hear it from anyone else. And if you can’t do it all at once, that’s okay.”

Where Kutone had pulled her hands away from him, she finally, slowly relaxed. Uncertainty paused her palms, but gingerly, she trailed her fingers through his black hair, and around the ridges of his ears. Down the nape of his neck, and settling into his grasp, she rested her hands on his shoulders. Pressed her lips to his forehead. “That’s a bit contradictory, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think so.”

The flannel of her pajamas shifted softly, as Kutone adjusted into a more comfortable position against him. With her weight pressed against him, Sebastian easily wound his arms around her, and fitted his lips and nose against the crook of her neck. So close, he thought, and the echo of another rang through him like the alarm bell of his heart—fuck, I love her so much.

She slipped her hand behind his head, her massaging fingers coaxing him to look up at her. “You
need to hear what happened.’’

He refused her touch, and instead pressed harder into her. “I want to understand.” His breath muffled against her skin, but a part of him knew, she felt his words, rather than hearing him. “You need to help me do that.”

Kutone’s fingers stopped at the same time as she deeply sighed. “This,” she said, slumping her shoulders. “Sitting together like this. His or her arms around me and refusing to let go.”

Sebastian froze. Was she insinuating something with her language?

“If you followed the same pattern as them,” Kutone went on, “you would tell me you love me. I’d warn you I’d leave you in the dust if you got too attached; you’d insist you’re different, that you could help me.”

The same pattern as them. She was talking about her past relationships. Realizing that much made his stomach flop backwards, but he recalled his own words: *I just want to be close to you.*

“I’d warn you again.” Her fingertips shook with her trembling whisper. “Warn you that what you’re doing is setting yourself up for heartbreak, not helping me. And I’d tell you I know this because I’d already seen this pan out, with someone else on this same couch. Multiple someone elses.”

He recalled her words: *Believe in me, okay?*

“I’d kiss you after that, because I liked how it felt to be loved. And I’d wring every last drop out of you.”

“You affairs,” Sebastian replied. “You slept around to fill in something.”

“Sex itself feels good,” said Kutone. “But Sebastian, I didn’t fuck around for the pleasure of another person’s body.” She pressed her cheek against his head. “It was the heartbreak. It was seeing them so disbelieving, so disgusted, so hateful of me—like it was validation for why I had to lose everything.”

“Validation was better than sex?”

“It gave me something definite. Like I finally had a reason for why my life went the path it did.” Kutone shrugged. “I know it doesn’t make sense. But having agency—knowing I made those choices, and seeing what my choices did to people—it was, weirdly, the most freeing concept for me then.”

“Then—what about me?”

“I don’t think I could live with myself,” Kutone replied, “if I did the same thing to you.”

“What made me special?”

“Your kindness.” She began dragging her fingertips through his hair again. “You listen without trying to fix. You’re quiet, but not ignorant. Observant of me, without overstepping your boundaries.”

She pulled back, and it was amazing, Sebastian thought, how her body spoke to his in inaudible yet visible tones, as he naturally released his hold on her to a gentle embrace.

“In such a short time,” said Kutone, “you’ve become everything to me, and even more. I can’t break the person who found the forgiveness to come find me, even though I’m so…distant.”
“It was hard,” he admitted. “Scary, even, to think you might eventually do the same thing to me. Cheat on me. But I think I get it. Better, I mean.” Reaching into the pocket of his sweatshirt, he pulled out his gift box. Clicking it open, he let the house’s firelight wink through the body of the crystalline teardrop inside. “When I saw this,” Sebastian went on, “I knew I couldn’t let you go.”

Kutone shrugged. “It’s just a little trinket.”

He rolled the crystal out onto his palm, and closed his fist over its smooth, cold surface. With his free hand, he drew Kutone back against him, and gently stroked her back. “They say,” Sebastian started, “it’s the frozen tear of a yeti. Not that anyone’s ever seen one—just valley folk tale.”

Her breath was soft like snow, yet warm like embers. Her lulling voice flowed, free of hesitating cracks. “And the yeti cried because…?”

“Because he was just a lonely kid.” He wasn’t sure where he’d heard this legend. Maybe he’d read it once at the library, or maybe his mother had told it to him once when he was a child. Wherever or whenever Sebastian had heard it, the story had stuck with him since then. And the rock—the Frozen Tear—became something of a sacred treasure to him. “He meets a human girl, abandoned by her family because she was sick and weak. Winter would have killed her, but the yeti boy helps her to his cave, and nurses her until she’s healthy enough to take care of herself.

“Turns out, she’s not as sick or weak as her family thought. She becomes the boy’s friend. They work together to make a living in the snowy countryside—she goes out to market in town, to sell the hides and meat and bone tools he makes from his hunt. He forages in the woods, for the hot meals she makes.

“What the kid doesn’t know, is that even though she smiles and laughs with him, she cries by herself, every night, because the fact remains her family had left her to die. How could one person be so unwanted, she thought. Was she allowed to be so happy with what the market called a little monster? And if so, how could she still cry over something already passed, over something she’s keeping a secret from her best friend?”

Kutone shifted again, this time laying her head against his shoulder. “Sounds familiar,” she murmured.

“But you’re different,” said Sebastian. The proof laid pressed in between their bodies, that synchronized beat of their hearts, that perfect fit of her voice against his, and the contours of her shoulders gliding under his fingers. “One night, she walks out into the middle of the frozen lake, and the ice gives way under her. She never struggles back to the surface, and the yeti boy has no idea until the next morning. He follows her tracks to the lake. He sees the hole in the ice, and the shoes she left behind.”

There was no need to say the boy had cried. From the way Kutone tensed against him, she already knew. Sebastian pocketed the crystal, and wrapped his arms around her. “You might have tried to do the same to me,” he muttered, “but I would never let you.”

“Sebastian,” she whispered, “I don’t trust myself anymore.”

“I trust you,” he urged. “Can you at least hold some faith in that?”

She flinched. Stiffened. Her thoughts, Sebastian understood, were battling inside her body. She bit her lip. Trembled, and then—

Then her lips were on his, and god they were so soft, and his entire body flared alive in that instant,
his hands tracing the curves of her shoulders, her back, her waist, her hips, and she rocked into his searching touch as she kissed him again and again. The world spun around him, his breath choked, and in his delirium, he lay back on the couch, and she was over him—god, she was over him with her hair tossed over one shoulder, her top unbuttoned under her nimble fingers, and her smile, that smile just for him, glowed. She laid light, teasing kisses on his lip, then planted a long, deep kiss that had him breathing hard when she pulled away. She tasted dry, sour, from just waking up, but that soon melted into juicy sweetness, as she kissed him harder.

His jeans were tight. His sweatshirt suffocated him. And she was at that perfect angle, and his hands were on her hips, guiding her down, down against him, and she kissed him—deep, starving, wildly, laughing—

And she broke the spell just as suddenly as it set in. Even as Kutone jumped back, Sebastian could still feel the pressure and taste of her lips on his. “Sorry,” she stammered, pursing her mouth into a thin line. “Habit. I mean… I couldn’t…”

Yet she didn’t move from her position on top of him, her weight pressing him down. He levered himself to his elbows. “I feel dizzy,” he mumbled.

“I—I’ll get off! Sorry—!”

Before she could scramble off him, Sebastian seized her by her wrist. “Don’t be. Please.” He let the words hang and settle into Kutone, before he heaved a shuddering breath. “This—this feels good.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “You’re right. I can feel you.” She teased a smile and ground against him again, encouraging an unconscious groan out of him. “God, Sebastian, I can tell—we’d be so good together.”

He understood the remainder of her thought. “Just not tonight.”

“Yeah.” Her voice was soft, sultry, breathy. “Not tonight. Not yet.” She leaned over him again, and pressed a long kiss into his lips. “And that’s okay,” she said. “All I want tonight is to fall asleep next to you.” She caressed his cheek with her fingertips. “Have you hold me close and maybe kiss me sometimes. It’s a nice thought.”

She pulsed with him, and seemed loathe to climb off him, but Sebastian liked her idea too.

Fall asleep next to her. Hold her close.

Maybe, kiss her sometimes.

Weaving her fingers between his, she helped him up and guided him to her room. There, door closed behind them, as she buttoned her top back up and slid under her covers, he shed his sweatshirt and changed pants. He buried himself next to her, allowing her scent to fill him through his every pore. She nestled against him, not even minding her thigh against that overexcited part of him, and in the first moments her breath spilled against his chest, she fell asleep.

But that was alright, Sebastian thought, because she’d opened up for him. She’d smiled at him. She’d laughed again. From the eyes of other, more cautious types, his reasons were flimsy at best. Too simple.

Here, he decided, was his first sometime. Against her forehead, at her hairline so that he kissed as many parts of her as he could—skin, hair, and even her flowery scent.

He decided next, he rather liked being simple.
Oof. These past couple weeks have not been kind to me, but I hope this chapter was still to your liking!

Thank you, as always, for all of your kudos and comments and bookmarks and hits--they all help my weeks feel a little better over time.

Find me at my tumblr if you want to chat!
For an underfunded country burg, Pelican Town sure knew how to throw a good Winter Star Festival. Even with the brim of her knit cap partially obscuring her sight, the decorative tree in the center of the town plaza still dazzled her. Against the clear winter weather, the tree’s lights sparkled in spattered reflections off the red, white, and gold tinsel garlands circling the boughs. Along with the matte-smooth globular glass ornaments, lightweight clay decorations crafted by the townspeople also swayed merrily from the needles. At the top, of course, glowed the titular Winter Star—or at least, a replica of the fable.

Gloved hands buried deep in the pockets of her parka, Kutone breathed out another plume into the wintry air. As always in the recent years of Winter Star celebrations, that familiar hollowness dug figurative trenches between her and the festivities. Some distance behind her, Gus regaled anyone within earshot the myriad aesthetics and uses of the peppermint herb. Vincent’s and Jas’s excited squeals, clipped by Jodi’s and Marnie’s warning calls, echoed into background ambience. The aroma of pine and gravy, baked yams and pumpkin ale, permeated across the plaza. Now and again, a delighted “Happy Winter Star!” followed by a “Thank you!” swelled and faded through Kutone’s perception.

Winter Star, she realized, always made her sad.

That could be why she annually overdressed for the occasion. With the long waves of her violet hair straightened into a smooth sheen, and a glassy lip balm lightly applied to kiss the cold air, she liked to think a little bit of style compensated for the sadness—the loneliness. Together with the decorated tree, she stood a chance of swatting away the bitterness that came with the cold.

The cheerful squeaks of the children faded, as Willy gathered them for their annual storytime. Vaguely, a unanimous cheer went up for the ciders and ales and wines, as Kutone craned her head up to the star. Shining. Bright. Just like the gem-crusted slab of rock resting in her pocket. She clasped her fingers around it, remembering Alex’s blinding grin when he handed it to her.

*Spit on it and shine it up, I guess. Might make something nice for your boyfriend, right?*

Maybe?

“Hey.”

Maybe not.

She turned around as an unconscious smile graced her lips. “Hey.” After considering Sebastian for a moment, she pulled her hands out of her pockets, and crossed her arms. “Aren’t you looking handsome today.”
Squaring his shoulders in his own thick coat, Sebastian pulled at his turtleneck. “Not my personal choice,” he started. “*Someone* keeps marking me up while I’m asleep.”

Glimpsing the borders of a bruise hiding beneath his turtleneck, Kutone lightly chuckled. “Mystery of the century, isn’t it?”

“Demetrius keeps asking, you know.”

“Not that I regret a single bite.”

“*Kutone.*”

“I can’t help it—my boyfriend’s especially delicious in his sleep.”

If not for his beanie, the steam rising from his head would have been clear to anyone nearby. Averting his gaze from Kutone’s, Sebastian pressed a free hand against his covered neck. “I guess,” he responded, “it’s not so bad, beyond the questions.”

“But if you need me to stop, you have to—”

“Say so. As with everything else you assume you’re pushing on to me. I know.” With his reassuring simper, Sebastian reached out, and caught a lock of Kutone’s hair. “So, how’s your first Winter Star in the valley?”

“Different,” started Kutone, and she went on to elaborate, the holiday frenzy that seized the city right after Spirits’ Eve. The stores started their holiday bargains, the Winter Star decorations went up even while the last leaves of autumn still clung to the boughs, the traffic through downtown crawled like molasses through a sieve, and the people—god, the people!—shoving and demanding and screaming and cursing! “Out there,” Kutone finished, “Winter Star brings out the worst in people.”

“And here I thought the secret gift exchange was the worst thing.”

Noticing a wave from Robin at one of the banquet tables, Sebastian started away. “Family obligations,” he muttered. “Don’t worry about it if Demetrius still bothers you.”

“I know how to be civil,” said Kutone. “And Demetrius doesn’t have to like me to do the same.”

“I wish I were as mature.”

“You learn,” Kutone replied, as she matched her steps with Sebastian. “Once I accepted there’s no changing certain people, I learned the subtle art of ‘not giving a fuck.’ Pretty effective skill, actually.”

Maru, circling the table to meet her brother and Kutone, caught the tail end of Kutone’s remark. Smiling through her gradually frosting glasses, she regarded Sebastian’s pensive expression, then laughed. “Are you finally getting Kutone into Solarion, Sebastian?”

“No,” Sebastian replied, expression still strained, if not mildly baffled. “We still have to design her character.”

“Geez, there just has to be a process to everything, doesn’t it? Happy Winter Star to you too, I guess.” Maru turned to Kutone. “Did you get your secret gift yet?”

At this, Kutone reached into an inside pocket of her coat, and pulled out the bumpy rock with its dull green growths. “Emerald in the rough,” she said, and cast a wary glance toward Sebastian. “From Alex.”
Maru never caught the uncertain flicker in Sebastian’s features, as she leaned close to examine the raw crystal. “The biggest question isn’t even how to go about refining it—it’s how Alex of all people got his hands on this. I thought you were the only one who went into those mines, Kutone!”

“I got the elevator working again, so I guess it’s open to anyone.”

“So I guess Alex is a pretty tough guy then, huh?”

She noted Sebastian’s crestfallen expression, and after pocketing the stone, pressed the tips of her fingers against his back. “Yes and no,” Kutone responded, grazing what she hoped was a reassuring touch. “Probably an emerald in the rough himself. Not my type.”

“Clearly,” Maru snorted, “as noted by a recent icy fixture in your life.” With a friendly guffaw at Sebastian’s glare, Maru flounced back to Demetrius’s side, and gaily tucked into the fare spread on the table.

Kutone took this chance to voice her assurance: “Whether or not I pay Clint to refine it, I’m still selling it. I told Alex as much.”

“He got you raw emerald,” Sebastian muttered. “I told you I hate this secret gift thing.”

“Is it the entire secret gift thing?” Kutone tested, “Or is it the concept of Alex giving me a precious gem as a gift?”

“Listen, I appreciate your honesty about his confessing to you, and your admission that you could have done him had you pleased, but for me it’s more of a symbolic thing, like, his giving you a shiny thing for Winter Star makes me feel—!”

Robin’s crooning cut through. “Oh lovebirds,” she practically sang, “I know you two can postpone your Winter Star date long enough to come say hi, can’t you?”

The rest of Sebastian’s outburst died and dissolved into a heavy sigh instead, as he slumped his shoulders and sulked the rest of the way to his family’s table. This required a talk later, thought Kutone, much as she knew Sebastian probably wouldn’t mention it again. But she needed to know the rest of his thought. Alex giving her a shiny thing on Winter Star makes Sebastian feel, what, exactly? Jealous? It seemed so uncharacteristic of Sebastian, but then again, Kutone grimly concluded, Winter Star brought out the worst in everyone.

Yet Robin didn’t seem to notice, as she, bedazzled, regarded her eldest. “Come on, Sebby!” she pressed. “I won’t push you to like the holiday, but you can’t look so down when you’re looking so gosh-darned handsome!”

“Mother…”

“Especially,” Robin continued, forcibly turning Sebastian around to face Kutone, “when you have this gorgeous friend of mine as company! Just think: you can kiss that girl and no one could stop you!” She turned a glare to Demetrius, eliciting a laugh out of her husband. “No, not even you, and especially not today!”

While a mortified Sebastian tried to cover his reddened face, Kutone chuckled. “Let him off easy, Robin,” she said, finally joining the family table. “That’s your son, you know.”

“Because he’s my son!” Robin corrected. “And also because this may be the last time I get to tease him like this. Mom’s gotta do her worst, Son—”
“And I know you’re not sorry,” Sebastian interrupted, hand still over his face. “Are you done yet?”

Kutone watched with an easy simper, but her thoughts stumbled over Robin’s off-handed remark. The last time? Not that it should have surprised her—Sebastian must have voiced his dreams to at least his mother. Maru had made the same sort of comment, once upon a before-Sebastian’s-birthday. And even a few months ago—autumn, after a fresh beatdown in the mines, while he changed the oil in his motorcycle—Kutone had accepted the possibility. Had even said to him, “Tell me what it’s like, when you get out there.”

So why did her throat clench? Why was her body trying to to wring out icy hot tears from the corners of her eyes?

Robin came with proper distraction. “Kutone! Maybe you can convince Sebby to stay!”

I could, she thought. I want to. But I have no right to. She flickered a small smile. “But he wants adventure, Robin. I have no reason to stop him.”

As an uneasy Sebastian once again endured Robin’s teasing and Maru’s accompanying laughter, Demetrius gestured to Kutone. Sidestepping the family fiasco, she rounded the banquet table and met chuckling Demetrius on the other side. “You know,” he started, “Robin’s right. Seems to me there’s nothing I can do to stop Sebastian from chasing you.”

“Trust me on this,” replied Kutone, “if nothing else—I tried.”

“Did you now?”

“He still came back. Knocked on my door in the middle of the night and asked to stay.”

“So that’s where he ran off to that night.” With a crinkle of his coat, Demetrius crossed his arms. “I’d wondered why Maru looked so anxious the day after his birthday.”

“Would you have stopped him, had you known?”

For a long moment, Demetrius watched his family as they joshed and quipped back and forth. He restrained his grin at the sight, and cleared his throat. “I would have tried. Yet at the same time, I notice he’s grown more assertive since I confronted you.”

“I notice that too. It’s…new.”

In their following silence, Demetrius turned his regard to Kutone’s troubled expression. Shook his head. Squaring his shoulders, he cast an inquisitive smirk down on Kutone. “And how about you, Kutone? Troubled? Confused?”

“Why so concerned, if that’s really how I look?”

“I was never here to play the bad guy,” Demetrius replied. “Grown man that he is, Sebastian’s still my concern. Anything goes wrong with you, it becomes his problem too. But this time—this time, for the first time, you look like you’re at an impasse.”

She shrugged off what she took as Demetrius’s triumphant attitude. “I have my own share of anxieties too, you know. Even if I don’t voice them.”

“Fair enough. What matters is that you’re aware.” Laying a clap on Kutone’s shoulder, Demetrius then addressed Sebastian. “Thanks for coming this way, Sebastian.” He pushed Kutone forward. “I believe you two have a date?”
“Not really—well—I guess…” The instant Sebastian’s bewilderment changed into suspicion, it also became the seed of an idea. Shaking his mother off and pushing his sister away, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “Later. We’re going out later. This evening.”

Demetrius, impressed, nodded his approval.

Kutone, meanwhile, yet again cursed Demetrius’s sharp intuition. She struggled to reason with her nerves, jostled and tangled by this new, assertive Sebastian, that for most likely perfectly viable reasons of his own, was getting ready to disappear from her life.

None of her senses had any idea how to cope with this development.

Luckily, by the time Kutone climbed up the backwoods road and rounded the corner to Sebastian’s house that evening, she’d settled on her decision: remain cool.

Oh how she nearly failed at that, when she found Sebastian in the seat of his motorcycle, engine warmed, purring, and idling. And while Sebastian still carried himself with his usual aloof slouch, there was a confident backbone to his poise that Kutone again found herself loathe to interrupt.

But her first step into the clearing quickly had Sebastian’s attention. “Perfect timing,” he said, gesturing her closer. “Engine’s warmed up. And you haven’t changed.”

“You did suddenly arrange this date,” Kutone replied. “And you said I looked good earlier, so I figured I’ll stick with it.”

“Well, forgetting what’s been said today, I agree with my mother. You’re, well, you know... I agree.”

“Your dishonesty’s endearing, Sebastian. I’m not being sarcastic. But I know you’re pissed off about Alex and a rough emerald I have no attachment toward.”

“And that you apparently have no reason to ask me to stay.” Hurt momentarily choked him, but Sebastian waved away Kutone’s response. “I know I’m petty,” he said instead, “but let me be petty, and then make myself better for it.”

“You’re confusing me, Sebastian.”

“I have something I want to show you. So get on, Kutone. Please.”

As Kutone climbed into the open space behind Sebastian, and, after a brief moment’s hesitation, wound her arms around his waist, he spoke again. “If there’s any turns,” he said, “don’t lean into them. Let me do the balancing. I promise I won’t go too fast, but, here. Earplugs. And…” He pressed his hand against the back of hers. “Hold tight.”

She fastened her grasp around him, as Sebastian knocked up the kickstand and, after a few testing revs, coasted down the mountain trail, past the town plaza and the Winter Star tree winking in the night, and finally, onto the pavement of the road out of Pelican Town. Through the orange-red flares of the tunnel lights, and against the cold air already funneling against them, Sebastian gradually accelerated, that by the time they left the tunnel behind, some part of Kutone left her as well. A combination, she realized, of the exhilarating rush of wintry air tossing her hair behind her, and the warmth and steadiness of Sebastian’s back. She pressed her cheek into the chilled fabric of his coat, but still couldn’t choke the giggle that escaped her.
And with that little laugh, her concerns from the day dissipated into the night. At a certain point, Kutone knew, the rush of wind would slow to a breeze, and with its eventual stop, she would have to face Sebastian again. Yet, maybe because of the cold frosting the edges of her wind-tousled thoughts, the task seemed a lot less daunting. She wished she could speak like the navy, sparkling sky above and speeding over them, and chasing the moon that gazed down on their backs. This, she understood, was the feeling that called Sebastian away from the valley. Exhilaration. Freedom. Sonorous voices, especially to a boy who had not quite seen past horizons dewed by starlight. Melancholy seeped into Kutone’s chest again. She could never speak in the same manner. She could never hold him back.

Their ride slowed, as Sebastian pulled off the highway, down another, smaller turnoff, and came to a crawl as they climbed a mountain trail.

Then finally, he stopped. The engine’s drone snapped silent, as the motorcycle leaned onto its kickstand. Kutone clambered off first, as she pulled her earplugs out and stretched. “I get it,” she whispered. “I get why you take those rides out.” She nodded her understanding. “It was amazing.”


At his gentle pull back from the cliffside and into his embrace, lights flickered on the horizon. While the stars had died in the sky over that one area, they seemed to twinkle from the ground instead. The reddish glow of streetlamps traced careful grids across, with some leading away into the darkness of the deserted expanse beneath the cliff. Red lights at the tops of spires flared on, then out, on, then out—warning signals for air traffic. Realizing she was staring down on Zuzu City took Kutone a moment to swallow, after which her spirit, freed from the ride to the viewpoint, came back down to earth.

But Sebastian’s voice was at her ear. “What do you think?”

Like a god, like a slave, like a lover, like a cheater. “It’s complicated,” she said. “You?”

“Same old, every time I come out here. Possible futures. What’s beyond all the glitter. What’s underneath it. How long until I can go there.” He paused, then with a deep breath, added, “How pathetically little it would matter to everyone else if I just left. Disappeared.”

Pain chiseled a wedge into the space between her throat and stomach, yet instead of voicing it, Kutone tightened her grasp around him.

“Alright,” Sebastian snorted, “maybe except for you.”

Still a “maybe.” How to make it definite? Superficial reassurances like “no, Sebastian, it would matter to me,” somehow didn’t feel right. Vapid words and phrases always failed to move him.

She could, instead, demonstrate. Teach him exactly how he’d saved her from herself. “I said this view’s complicated,” Kutone began. “Look.”

She first pointed to the east side of the city, where the streetlights outlined definite blocks of neighborhoods. “My mother and my father live somewhere there,” she said. “East side suburbia. Freshly painted fences, manicured lawns and gardens, and the neighbors keep mostly to themselves. Elementary, middle, and high school, I lived there.”
Then, dragging her pointing hand across, she gestured higher and beyond. “University’s on the other side, northwest. You cross the southern boundary of the university community, and you’re on Zuzu’s west side. You don’t want to end up on Zuzu’s west side, if you care for your safety.” She dropped her hand. “Jaci was from there.”

“Jaci?”

“Was a best friend. Had a bad habit of taking me as her wingwoman, and then insisting afterward I stole her prey, though I never cared for them. She was gunning for Rhei first when we met him as second-year undergrads.”

Sebastian’s embrace left her momentarily, as he shook out a cigarette from the box in his pocket. After a few snaps of his lighter, and the rush of his breath dissipating into the winter night, he was around her again.

“Rhei and I weren’t immediately romantic,” Kutone went on. She motioned to one of the skyscrapers in the central area of the city. “And Jaci wasn’t always so venomous. I got promoted. I worked closely with Rhei, and we hit it off. Then the extenuating circumstances kicked in, and I lost it all.”

She drew her finger down, whistling the sound of her fall. “Like I got pushed off the top of that building. And I tried dealing with it. But Sebastian,” she trailed off, pressing against him as she slipped a hand underneath his coat, and up his back, “Sebastian, you have no idea, how goddamn lonely I was after it all happened.”

“So you started sleeping around.”

“As many as I could. The first one was in our IT department. Or accounting. I can’t remember anymore.”

Snow drifted in quiet flakes, like the stars had changed into shining, feathery down on their descent toward the earth. White dotted Sebastian’s beanie and hair, and the shoulders of his coat, but his breath kept the snow away from Kutone, as he returned her embrace. “After that?”

Kutone motioned a shrug, and gestured toward the ground, still in the vicinity of the skyscrapers. “A girl from the same floor I fell to. We both knew we were just fucking around.”

“After that?”

“Why do you want to know? Contrary to your step-father’s belief, I’m not proud of them.”

“Maybe I just want to know more. You’ve been there, you’re from there. Maybe you didn’t have the best means of meeting and finding new people, but you’ve met so many. You have memories. You have experiences, perceptions, prejudices, biases of so many things. You have—you’ve got a lot of things I don’t have.”

“Not that any of it’s admirable.”

“But you’re fighting against that. That’s why you were honest with me at the beginning of this winter.”

Sebastian was, in Kutone’s honest and helpless opinion, too good, especially for her. Somehow, his naivete had yet to die, despite the jabs and stabs it had inevitably taken over the years. And now, he used that same naivete to confront and comfort her.

Then again, “naivete” was an unfair word. “Innocence” was much better.
He protected his innocence—though of course Sebastian would never admit it—and let Kutone in to see it. So, how to relate understanding, and gratitude at the same time, without sounding like she wanted to hold him back?

Well, she’d always been a woman that *did*, rather than *said*. Stepping to a position in front of him, and dragging her gloved hands up his body, Kutone chuckled at Sebastian’s alarmed embarrassment. “You’re too good to me, Sebby,” she murmured. “And no snide counters right now—I’m being real.

“You inspire me, you know. You make me want to quit being that woman I was before. I want to be better because of you, and I want to be here for you. Only you.”

His alarm changed to charm. Some fully realized thought flickered across Sebastian’s features, and into the slow, deliberate disposal of his cigarette. He took it from his lips, crushed it in his hand, and let the papers and leaves fall away as he wove his hands into her hair. “Then why did you tell my mother you had no reason to stop me?”

“I’ve been selfish for a long time. If you think a trip out of the valley is good for you, I can’t stop you.”

He dragged a hand down. Traced her bottom lip with his thumb. “Look. You’re the first person I ever brought here,” he murmured. “This is my space. My rules. So be honest. If with no one else, then be selfish with me.

“If I tried to leave, would you stop me?”

“I *wouldn’t*,” Kutone reiterated, her voice already catching. Sebastian’s gray eyes watched hers, as if he knew the real answer would pour forth soon. “I *can’t* stop you.”

She imagined a Stardew Valley without him, and she saw a hollow, black, starless sky instead.

She imagined walking along the shores of the mountain lake, and smelling crisp, cold, dewy air, rather than smoldering cigarettes on the breeze.

She imagined a moment like this, Sebastian around her, woven into her hair, pressed against her while snow frosted their shoulders, and then saw the same moment without him. Her arms, empty. Her body, cold.

“I wouldn’t stop you,” she said again, “because you have every right to live your life like you want to, but Sebastian—!” Tears drowned her voice. Filled in the void that opened wider with each hypothetical thought. “I—I have no right to stop you, but I would want to, I’d want to stop you so badly! If only just to stay with me, Sebastian, and if you left—if you disappeared—I would—!”

He kissed her, light and airy on her lip.

And again, with a nibble.

She leaned into him as he kissed her again, as he left the taste of smoke on her lips and tongue, as he, brushing her hair aside and over her shoulder, drew his touch down her cheek, her chin, her collar, her breast. She shivered, and dragged her hand down, down, down past his belt and slowly along the zipper of his pants.

“So please let me prove myself,” she murmured. “Come home with me tonight.”
it’s a long ride home, her hands consistently in the right places at the right times, keeping him so desperately excited until he pulls into the open space behind her house. and after he parks the bike and on their way up the front steps of the veranda, he can’t stop kissing her, each press of their lips teasing the moment she lets him free.

her place. he loves her place. loves the fire burning in the living room, loves the creak of the wood underneath their steps, loves the echoing thud of his pushing her against the wall and their breaths and her laughs and her moans, the rustle of their coats folding onto the floor, the shuttering of her door, the creak of the bedsprings as she pushes him down first.

her. the sight of her reaching behind and pulling down on the zipper of her dress. the vision of her body stepping out of her clothes, and the lovely sway of her shoulders and hips as she climbs on top of him. the taste of her lips. the pressure of her hand on his chest and trailing down. the plush of her body against his touch, and her kiss and breath against his ear—please let me make this about you, sebastian.

what about you, kutone? this is about us.

us is another time, i promise. tonight is just you.

and she kisses him deeply, the kind of kiss that seizes his breath, staunches his protest. her palm pressed between his legs, her fingers stroking him, she pulls down the zipper and undoes his belt, unhitches the button and grazes her fingertips along him. she electrifies him. resuscitates him. turns him on so good and so hot he needs to strip. she helps him out of his sweatshirt. pushes up the hem of his undershirt. easdowns the waistband of his pants with one hand and hooks his turtleneck with the finger of her other hand, and pulls it down. plants another suckling bite on the kiss mark blooming on his neck, and as she drags his pants further down, she grazes her nails along his skin.

she trails her hand back down, down—and he’s throbbing so good and hot and hard—and she comes up, her hand drawing up his length. again, back down, down to gently cup him, and then, up again, his shorts a teasing barrier between his body and her touch.

just feel me, okay, sebby? just feel me. relax.

one last kiss, a light pull on his lip, and on her next stroke, she pushes down his shorts. allows his sensitive skin to brush against her palm, as she grasps him around his base and strokes up. and again. and again. groans escape him in his pleasure; her name a breathless gasp in his voice.

the strain of fabric around his legs. the pressure of her body against him, his thighs, his waist. the feathery strokes of her fingertip against him, and then—oh god, then—it’s warm and wet and it licks slowly up. gives way to the plush of her lip, the heat of her breath, tracing his very tip before she suckles a kiss and licks back down.

he seizes, he burns, he closes his eyes and draws a sharp gasp—oh, fuck, kutone—and she drags her tongue back up. closes her lips around him and pulls her mouth back until he slips out, and she stops with him quivering against her bottom lip.

does it feel good?

he can barely groan out his answer, as she wraps her fingers around him. strokes him up again. tosses her hair aside and pulls him into her mouth. all the way in. back out, to the cusp of her lips. she leaves a kiss. sucks him back in, and every time her tongue flicks across him, every time she pumps her hand, something deep inside him coils. tightens. spasms him into involuntary reactions, like combing her hair away from her caramel face, and the unwitting thrust of his hips. like watching her
hand and mouth take all of him in and then pull him back out, and begging her to do it all faster and harder.

and watching the violet waves of her hair ripple with each nod of her head, listening to the slick suckle of her strokes and kisses, feeling her fingertips idling along his heated skin—knowing she does this to him, for him, and so sweetly and willingly without asking for anything in return, and remembering her words at that cliffside overlooking the city: I want to be better because of you.

oh—

I want to be here for you.

oh—fuck—

Only you. Come home with me.

kutone—i can’t—

her encouraging moan hums from deep within her throat, and shudders in searing waves along the edges of his body. his breath cuts, choked, as the waves rush into a flare up his neck, back down in icy relief, and with her mouth still around him, his entire world quakes in sweet ecstasy. her hair still tangled around his fingers, he pressed her head down onto him as her hand finishes him.

moonlight catches the glisten of cream leaking from the corner of her mouth, and the last spasms of his body as her hand slows. his breath steadies. his vision spins with each deliberate, heavy breath.

she did this to him. she let him slip out of her plush lips for the last time. she sits up and presses a knuckle to the corner of her lip, as he drops his hand from her hair. sweat along the crook of her neck and beading against her cheeks and forehead gleams as she breathes heavily through her nose, and with her free hand between her own legs, she holds that gorgeous position with her eyes askance.

and even though exhaustion pins him to the bed, he knows what she’s considering. knows she’s about to sully herself for his sake.

don’t, he breathes, don’t swallow it.

she shifts her glittering, bewildered, chocolate eyes to his, heavy, gray, hooded.

spit it out, he says. his reason—because you’re so beautiful, kutone, the prettiest thing to happen to me and i won’t let you do something you think makes you dirty—turns over and over in his thoughts. rolls up to the tip of his tongue, but his mind’s shutting down. please, he manages instead, just spit it out.

he trusts she did so, in the space between the moment her presence left him, and the moment she lays down next to him again.

sebastian? she murmurs, are you okay?

he barely croaks out a reply. wills his heavy body to turn to her, wrap around her, and press his searching kiss against her lips.

when he feels her smile, feels her breath against his cheek as she repeats his name, sensation melts away. his muddled thoughts over missed opportunities fades to silence, even as he accepts another kiss.
semi-nude and embracing each other, they fall asleep, drifting together in their shared dream.

Chapter End Notes

Yes. Yes I updated the rating on this because of this chapter and a future chapter. Yes this was kinda difficult to write. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, okay?

The amount of romanticism that goes into this fic really astounds me, though. Like, I'm about to start gagging at my own fic at certain points, and this chapter takes the cake.

So maybe I'm just uneasy. Spare me, alright?
Hey!! Thanks as always to all of you who comment, kudo, bookmark, or even click this dang thing. Sorry I couldn't upload last week, I was really seriously out of it but now I'm feeling a little better.

...I know I'm still late WHOOPS.

Also, I have a bit of a vacation coming up! Update changes are gonna be at the end of the chapter!

The next wintry morning shined through the bedroom curtains in silvery, gossamer threads—an irritating distraction for Sebastian, as he rolled onto his side. Through bleary eyes, he lifted his head from the pillow, and tried reading the face of a digital clock indicating some time after 10am.

Still plenty of time to—wait—

He levered himself up by his elbow, and swept a glance around him. Wooden floor, stylish bookshelf, nightstand with a lamp and digital clock. Sunshine leaked through a window over the headboard, and a duvet covered what he realized, in a cold sweat, was his half-naked body.

The salvation to his confusion announced itself with a soft knock on the door, followed by Kutone, fully dressed in a sweater and pants, peeking in. “Well, good morning,” she said, easing herself inside and shutting the door. “Did you sleep okay?”

Very well, in fact, but even that rare occurrence dissolved in his understanding that last night wasn’t just a particularly hot dream. Kutone’s mellow expression, as she crossed the room and climbed on top of the duvet, as she flicked his hair aside and kissed his cheek, proved it enough. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “I just—I need a shower.”

A cold one, he mentally added, as Kutone nodded to the bathroom, and crept out of the bedroom.

From her vantage point over the rim of a steaming mug of cocoa, Kutone decided she liked the damp, glazed look of a Sebastian fresh out the shower, just a little too much. It was another detail she added to a growing list in her private journal, a list of all the reasons she found herself less and less able to control herself around him. His ultimate weapon against her—though of course Sebastian failed to notice it—was the confidence that had risen to the surface the entirety of last night. From the motorcycle ride to the viewpoint over Zuzu, and to the moment he let her push him down and indulge herself on the taste and scent of his vulnerability, Kutone had ample evidence to definitively conclude, confidence suited Sebastian well.

Uncertainty was his constant companion of choice, however, which rendered him cute and boyish instead as he sat across the table from her.

“I don’t have coffee,” Kutone admitted. “Tea or cocoa okay?”
“Neither,” Sebastian replied. “I—I don’t need anything right now.”

He breathed deeply, and leaned back in his seat. The crackle of the fire in the living room hearth, along with the clicks of Oki’s nails on the hardwood, seemed to do little to interrupt his thoughts. Eyes up toward the ceiling, Sebastian barely blinked. “You,” he started, “you really did that to me last night. I wasn’t just dreaming?”

“I can do it again, if you need the proof.” When he leaned forward again, and cradled his head between his hands, Kutone put down her drink. “Unless it wasn’t good for you?”

He raked his hands through his hair. “It was—it was kind of amazing. To be honest.”

“You’re not forcing that for my sake, are you?”

“There’s a lot of things I’d like to say about it,” said Sebastian, lifting his flushed face. “But I get the strangest feeling you know exactly how to work me up—and with projects inevitably piling up back home, I can’t really afford to stay another night.”

Kutone posed a wry smile, as she sipped again on her cocoa.

“You were really okay without…?”

“Now I have the strangest feeling,” Kutone replied, “that the moment I let you explore me, this cool, embarrassed restraint you’ve kindly established for my sake will come completely undone. And at that point…” She grinned as Sebastian hid his face. “At that point, I don’t think one night will be enough for you.

“So, to answer your question, last night was just about you. I wanted to make it about you. As long as you liked it…”

He reflected on her words a moment, then nodded. “Yeah. I get it.”

“And, thank you,” she added, “for minding how I felt too.” She regarded Sebastian’s inquisitive expression, but waved aside his inquiry with a smile. Past hookups always wanted her to swallow, even if she grimaced and gagged. Not that she’d explain this to Sebastian—all he needed, Kutone felt, was her present honesty. So instead, standing from her seat, she left a gentle comb of her fingers through his damp hair on her way to the kitchen. “You came a little earlier than I expected, though.”

After choking her laughter at Sebastian’s sputtering response, she put an empty pot on the stove. “Don’t worry about it—endurance comes with experience.”

“Fuck’s sake, Kutone, would you stop?”

“Then choose—tea or cocoa. And then forgive me for wanting to keep you a little longer.”

Sebastian finally relaxed, meeting Kutone’s teasing smile with his own understanding sigh. “I mean,” he started, “I guess I wouldn’t mind a light breakfast. Something to go with a hot cocoa. Light on the sweet.”

Toast and a hardboiled egg, they decided. Quick and easy enough that, while they peeled eggs, Sebastian had a chance to nod toward the open package. “Winter Star presents from abroad?”

“Care package from home,” Kutone corrected. She cracked, rolled, and squeezed the shell of her second egg. “Rhei’s got a card in there for you too. Yeah, trust me, I made that face too.”
Trudging back to the table, Sebastian peeled back the packing material inside, and picked his way through tangerines, a bag of individually wrapped white squares, a pack of incense sticks, and a baking tin so deeply swathed in aluminum wrap, Sebastian nearly forgot the envelope with his name written across the front.

After learning the tin contained “Dad’s killer lemon pound cake,” underneath its onion-like layers of foil, he finally, carefully turned the envelope in his hands. Next to him, Kutone set the table. “I doubt he’s out to poison you,” she said. “Then again, it’s probably some disgustingly happy Winter Star greeting card, so I guess there’s no difference.”

“Did you get one too?”

“No, but I know the guy too well.”

“What about the rest of the stuff in here?”

“Later,” Kutone urged. “Open it up—I want to see what he wants with you.”

Gesturing for and accepting a knife, Sebastian slid the blade along the crease of the envelope, and without much further encouragement, pulled out the card nestled inside. Thankfully free of glitter, Kutone and Sebastian found, it was an anticlimactically plain greeting card, but the contents had Sebastian wide-eyed within seconds.

“His business card,” he said, then flashed the open card to Kutone. “And a message.”

Sebastian—

*Hope you had a good Winter Star. Tell Kutone mine was Joja-free, and the entire building was chaos when I put in my letter of resignation. Kind of a great fuck-you before I left to use the rest of my vacation time.*

*If you’re still considering heading out this way, let me know. I’ll be happy to help you start getting your shit together.*

*At the same time, take care of her. No matter what you decide, don’t leave behind the person most important to you.*

*Looking forward to hear from you. May commission you at some point as well.*

Rhei.

“You’re sure I should be reading this?” Kutone responded. “Seems like he really meant it for your eyes.”

“I also don’t get the feeling he’d care much,” replied Sebastian. “More than that, I’m not good at the openness thing, so, this is my attempt at getting better.”

He could have fooled her, the queen of secrets, without trying. But seeing his troubled expression, as he lowered the card and laid it flat on the table, Kutone couldn’t bring herself to tease him further. “You’re doing really well, Sebby,” she murmured, stroking his cheek. “You’re doing so well.”

“You’re not going to ask about…?”

About Sebastian heading out of the valley and into Rhei’s care? Kutone shook her head. “If you’re not ready to talk about it, I won’t ask. Besides,” She paused here to lean into him, “you already
know how I feel about it. Take your time.”

Their breakfast afterward was in relative silence, the drone of the weather report on TV, as well as the crackles of a newly stoked fire in the hearth, filling the house with pleasant white noise. Even Oki contributed, in between the crunches of food between his teeth, and his lapping slurps of water before his nails signaled another wander around the house. None of it, however, was uncomfortable for Kutone, and while she couldn’t speak for Sebastian, he at least seemed content, his reservations about the night before dissipated in the face of her honesty.

When they stood together at the kitchen sink, plates, mugs, and silverware soaking in soapy water, Kutone opened up once more, this time, with a sigh. “The care package,” she started, “is more for my grandfather, than me.”

As Kutone washed and rinsed their breakfast away, Sebastian drew a dish towel into his hand. He accepted clean, wet dishes as though helping Kutone were part of his daily routine. “Tangerines and a bunch of white cubes?”

“Rice cakes,” Kutone corrected. “For the new year. My mother really wants me to clean up Grandpa’s shrine.”

With the last of their breakfast put away, Kutone pulled out a basket from one of her cupboards, and loaded the wicker cradle with the tangerines and cakes. The task, she explained, really should have fallen on her mother, but with Kutone being the only available kin, sending off the family’s gratitude and prayers became Kutone’s responsibility. “Not that I mind,” she added, “because out of any of my family right now, I owe him the most.”

And she hadn’t visited the shrine in a while. “But I’ve kept you long enough,” said Kutone. “Thanks for indulging me.”

Sebastian turned to the clock hanging over the TV in the living room. Nearly noon. He likely needed to get back home as soon as possible, yet in a manner similar to a bygone summer evening, he lingered. His pensive expression betrayed the calculations churning in his head, and then, as though resigning himself to some inevitable outcome, he rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t mind,” he said. “Going with you.”

This, coming from the same person who just admitted work was piling up. Kutone, bemused, crossed her arms and raised a brow.

“It just seems interesting,” Sebastian balked. “I mean—maybe, just maybe—I want to know more. About you. Your life. And even if I can’t stay the night, I can stay until…” He glanced back at the clock. “Until the early afternoon.”

“What you’re trying to say, is you want to stay as long as you possibly can, but you don’t want to directly admit that to me.”

“I won’t indulge you with an answer on that one.”

“Fair enough!” She pulled on the coat draped over her chair, and grasped her basket by its handle as she stepped toward the door. “But I promise it won’t take too much time.”

Outside, as Oki shot ahead and Sebastian trailed behind, winter had begun receding from blankets of snow, to sheets of frost. While the air still icily bit at their noses, and still turned their breaths into white plumes, the first rays of approaching spring shone through the gray haze of winter above. Clouds still carrying powdery snow parted at the gentlest touch of sunlight.
For their first few steps out of the house and along the path toward the western side of the Banks, Sebastian lingered behind. Stared at the frosted ground and periodically looked up to watch Kutone’s hair and scarf swaying ahead of him. At least, she guessed that was what he was doing, until she stopped and offered her free hand.

“There’s no one here to see,” she added, and immediately, Sebastian laid his palm on hers. Grasped tightly. Let her lead him the rest of the way. Eventually, he hurried his steps to match his pace with hers, and his grip loosened to a casual weave of their fingers.

“You said this was for New Year’s,” said Sebastian. “Shouldn’t you wait until Eve?”

“I don’t want to wait too long on this one,” Kutone replied. “Like I said, I owe my grandfather a lot.”

Past the farm’s northern bridge, and around the corner of the dilapidated skeleton of the greenhouse (“You could probably get my mother to fix that, if you want,” remarked Sebastian, and received Kutone’s “It’s not a priority,” in return), across the thin western bridge to a little alcove tucked in the corner of the farm, where silence set in thicker than the wintry valley. While Sebastian marveled the unmoving trees and coat of frost on top of the shrine’s roof, Kutone released her hand from his, and knelt in front of the shrine’s offering plate.

An offering plate already adorned with smooth acorns, cherry-red holly, and bright blue crocus flowers. “Someone beat me to it,” Kutone breathed, and setting her basket on the icy ground, stood up and inspected their surroundings.

Sebastian, hands deep in the pockets of his coat, blinked. “Someone beat you to it?”

“Someone got here before I did,” Kutone clarified. Strange, she almost added, but then she peered into the opening of the shrine.

A pair of bright red Junimos, each holding a bundle of crystal fruits, stared back at Kutone from inside Grandpa Issu’s shrine. She sucked in her exclamation at their vehement flailing, begging her to keep silent.

Yet Sebastian was behind Kutone and trying to peer over her shoulder. “Something hiding in there?”

“No,” Kutone choked. “Nothing!!”

Why the Junimos wanted secrecy, she still had no idea, but clearly, they wanted no other attention than hers. They squeaked and chirruped desperately, goading her to continue distracting Sebastian’s curious eye. “He’d keep your secret too, you know!” she hissed at the pair, but still received their anxious squeals. “Well then, go! Do your magic! Flash out and disappear!”

To this, both fairies held up the crystal fruits in their hands.

“You can leave those for Grandpa later!”

“Okay, look,” Sebastian groaned. He pressed a hand on Kutone’s shoulder and gently pushed her aside. “You can’t tell me you’re not talking to something in there.”

For a moment, a hopeful thought flickered in Kutone’s chest. Maybe, with his level of imagination, Sebastian might understand what he was about to see a lot better than most people. Maybe he’d see the Junimos, remember some kind of valley legend about them, and shrug it off. Better yet, he might not see them at all.

But as he stared first at the filled offering plate, then into the space inside the shrine, that hopeful
thought quickly smoldered. Even more so as he reached inside, and after a defeated chirp echoed, he pulled his hand back out, holding one of the red Junimos in his palm.

Why, oh why, thought Kutone, were the damn things so stubborn when they were meant to be so secretive?

“Talk about strange,” said Sebastian. “Unless you really were just talking to a couple apples and crystal fruits?”

“It’s something of a quirk?” Kutone slowly replied, careful to maintain normalcy in her voice and expression. “I mean, I talk to my dog too, you know.”

Sebastian stared at the dead-still Junimo in his hand, then turned a worried frown to Kutone. “Either you were hiding your stress over this past year really well, or you’re trying to talk me into moving in with you.”

She tried talking over the choking seizure of her chest. “The fact you were able to say that with a perfectly straight face tells me you’ve been thinking about it?” Seeing Sebastian’s features rush to an embarrassing red, Kutone allowed herself a secret relieved breath. Get his attention off the possibly-unbreathing Junimo in his hand, and to something bound to fluster him. Misdirection had always been her game, after all.

“I—I know it’s weird,” Sebastian mumbled. “Someone like me living and making it on a farm?” He suddenly shook his head and pressed his free hand over his eyes. “Never mind—just—ignore what I said; it was totally, completely stupid.”

“It’s not—!”

“And I even said it right in front of your grandfather’s shrine? Is that—is that considered blasphemy?”

Kutone laid her palm over Sebastian’s hand, still clutching the Junimo. Easing his grip loose, she chuckled. “It’s considered a sincere, honest thought,” she said. “Neither stupid or rude.”

“Even though I’ve talked to you about leaving? It’s at least irresponsible—I’m not here to sway your hopes one way or the other, Kutone, you know that.”

“Consider me unswayed, then.” She offered her palm; the red apple rolled over her fingertips and into the safety of her hand. She swore she felt a relieved sigh roll through the Junimo. “Besides, who knows what we’ll decide to do with our futures? You might leave me behind for someone more deserving.”

“I might. Or I might stay. If only because I doubt there’s anyone like you out there.”

“I think you’d be surprised,” Kutone laughed, reaching back into the shrine. She carefully released the Junimo, and motioned for it and its companion to remain quiet. Then dragging her basket close, she pulled an incense stick from its box, and gestured to Sebastian. “Lighter.”

He dug into his pocket and pulled out his lighter. Still frowning, he handed it to Kutone. “Usually, I’d agree,” he remarked. “I know there’s too much out there that I haven’t seen. You’re living proof of that.”

“But…?”

“It’s probably just another stupid, naïve thought I’m having.” With a light shrug, Sebastian lifted his
cupped palm over the open lighter, and shielded the end of Kutone’s incense from a slight breeze. “I get the feeling you’re the only person of your kind, Kutone. At least, the only person I could—well—I could like so much.”

Tendrils of perfumed smoke rose from the end of the stick, as Sebastian pulled his hand back, and Kutone let the smoldering incense rest in the holder carved into the offering plate. She began unwrapping the individual rice cakes and stacked them neatly away from what she finally knew as the Junimos’ offerings.

Hands clasped in her lap, she watched the smoke rise, gentle as though they were Sebastian’s. “I could say the same about you, love,” she softly replied. Smiled at the starstruck blush she spied from the corner of her eye. Terms and names of endearment used to always feel flat and sour on her tongue, but this time, it slipped. She forgave herself for it, and lifted her clasped hands up to her chest. Closed her eyes and nodded her head forward.

Sebastian remained silent.

Images of Grandpa’s stocky shoulders and fluffy beard and crinkled eyes all wavered in Kutone’s thoughts. Grandpa Issu, she called, and his wheezing, content laugh answered.

Grandpa Issu, I promise I’m doing the best with your gift.

I can tell, Grandpa seemed to whisper back. I look forward to seeing how much more you raise from this ground!

Well, it’s still not in any presentable condition. But I love this place more and more with each passing day.

It shows, my child. You have such kindness again in your smile—I believe you will restore light to it yet. You, and my friends, and yes, even that young man I see next to you—you will all shine soon.

“Soon…?” She opened her eyes, and stared again at the smoke curling into the sky. “All of us will shine?”

Lowering and unclasping her hands, Kutone turned to find Sebastian staring. His prior embarrassment gone, a little simper turned up the corner of his mouth.

“You look happy,” said Kutone, nudging him back to reality.

“If I?” replied Sebastian. He accepted Kutone’s hand as she stood up and helped him to his feet. “I mean, all things considered, it’s been a good winter so far.”

The presence of positive words in his mouth would usually have startled Sebastian, but this time, he seemed to accept their existences, as well as their effects on him. Some realization established an eccentric twinkle to his eyes, as he regarded Kutone for a long moment. “I guess I should get going.”

“I can’t keep you forever—you made that clear.”

“I regret that.” Then, without a single pause, “Can I kiss you, Kutone, before I go?”

Even the Junimos pressed their hands to their cheeks, as Kutone, aware of the heated palpitations in her chest, nodded. Then his arms were around her waist, and his light kisses, each pulling on her bottom lip, nearly had her begging him to not leave.

“I’ll see you soon,” was all Sebastian said, as he slid his grasp away from around Kutone’s body,
and headed toward the northern bridge.

*He's getting good*, thought Kutone. Shining, even. She pressed her fingers to her lips. *He's getting way too good.*

Chapter End Notes

In a different iteration of this chapter, the Junimos were found out, but it was a bit too cheesy so I axed it.

In other news, thanks all for your patience! Here’s the unfortunate thing, however. I'll be on vacation 3/23 to 3/31. Which means, I won't have much of a chance to work on revisions. Meaning, **no updates 3/23 or 3/30.** I promise, however, that I'll be back to regular updates come 4/6.

You can get in touch with me on my [tumblr](https://tumblr.com) if you wanted to ask me stuff or say things at me!
Hello folks! I'm back! From here until the end of this story, updates will be regular, I promise! Or at least, I'll do my best to keep them regular, since we never know what life’s going to hit us with.

As usual, you can always hit me up on my [tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com) if you want to ask me (or my characters) any questions! I'll be trying to get more original content up than my usual reblogging resources spell I've been having.

And thank you all for your patience these past couple weeks. I'm seriously feeling a lot better, and very much pumped to finish this, aight? Aight. And keep feeding me those hits, kudos, bookmarks, and comments, because your support be food of love.

New Year’s came and went, and the last month of winter gradually faded in favor of the greening buds of spring once again. While the passing of his favorite seasons always put Sebastian in his usual distant melancholy, this year, it never had the chance to set in. The final days of the old year had him in a perennial crunch mode, with last-minute commissions and contracts flooding his inbox every time he thought he saw an end to the reams and reams of coding and programming.

He greatly appreciated the income, but a new agitation set in as the days between him and Kutone stretched further and further apart. She did come over, and she did relieve him—and boy did she relieve him—but not actually being there at the Banks and seeing what she saw, bothered him more than it ever did before. Spring coming meant she started work again, and Kutone working again meant the time Sebastian could spend with her would be unforgivingly limited.

Life itself was unforgiving, he reminded himself, and while he nursed his frustrations, winter gave way to spring, and finally, finally, the contracts slaked off.

It was an almost-oppressive spring afternoon, so oppressive he swore he could hear birdsong even through the ceiling of his basement space, and even above his family’s hustle and bustle upstairs. His mother, making calls to workshops outside the valley for tools and parts. Maru, thundering down the hall to make it Harvey’s within the half-hour. Demetrius, shouting back, “Yoba Almighty, Maru, at least walk with purpose when you’re going down the path—don’t sprint it!” And that damned birdsong. Happy, carefree, free. No family molds or work molds or friend molds to force their shapes into, just free.

Sebastian stared at his empty computer screen. Sighed. Agitation and oppressive spring. Relief and birdsong. There was, he knew, more to his frustration than those superficial annoyances. More specifically, it was a question he’d failed to ask Kutone during the winter: Have I been good enough for you so far?

He leaned on his stool, pressing his back against the wall and keeping himself balanced with a foot up on his computer desk. Grading himself, Sebastian judged himself a huge fucking failure of a boyfriend—not nearly good enough. Look at her, he’d think to himself. Had a massive fallout at her old job, and with her ex, and yet, she’d somehow resolved both of those problems. On her second year of restoring that old plot of land, each season more successful than the last. And a sexy devil to
top it off, if Sebastian ever knew any—Yoba knows no country girl, not even a weird one like Abigail, could ever be called devilish—and Kutone made him feel so goddamn good, without asking for anything in return. Demetrius still disapproved of her, and yet, they were civil with each other. Civil!

A good boyfriend for a woman like Kutone, thought Sebastian, was someone who could stand on her level. Same field. Equal height. But the disparity between him and her felt like an abyssal maw Sebastian could never bridge. He was the winter to her spring, a child in the face of an adult, the night to her day, the trash to her—

“You should go visit her.”

He leaned too far back. The stool slid out from underneath him, and Sebastian, twisting himself into a screamingly painful angle, crashed onto the hard floor.

Robin, poking her head through the doorway, cringed in his stead. “You left your door open.”

So that was why he heard everything upstairs. Gritting his teeth against what he swore was a pulled muscle in his back, Sebastian untangled himself and wordlessly propped his stool back up. Clambering into his seat, and groaning again at his aching body, he cast an inquisitive, albeit irritated, expression toward his mother.

“Just checking.” Robin replied, smiling her nonchalant grin. “Wanted you to run me an errand, but I know you’ve been busy.”

“I just finished.”

“Doing some thinking, then?”

“Something like that.”

“You looked like it.” She gestured inside, and with a nod from Sebastian, approached his computer desk. Laying down a stack of papers, she slid them toward her son. “Have Kutone help you out, then,” she suggested. “She’s the best listener you can get after your own mother, and you can deliver these to her too. For me.”

“Or you could have just asked me that from the beginning, making this conversation less awkward for the both of us.”

Robin laughed as she made her way back to the door. “I knew you’d pull through for me. The sooner the better on those, okay?”

Carefree. Nonchalant. His mother, bouncing back up the steps to work, was a lot like birdsong. Not nearly as oppressive, of course.

The pages Robin had handed to him were small packets of invoices, white, yellow, and pink pages attached at the top margin and waiting for Kutone’s signature. Without flipping through, Sebastian already knew the content—Kutone had told him on one of her many visits, that she’d start her new year with building investments for the farm. Expansions to both the barn and coop, as well as plans for her own house. “I could use at least two more rooms,” she’d mused. “And I really want to get started on a cellar.”

Through all of her grief with Rhei and her old life in the city, wine had been the one thing Kutone couldn’t abandon. She practically glowed whenever she reminisced on her past experiences and visits to other vineyards across the valley. She wanted to experiment with blends and woods and
spices. Design a label—“Way too soon to be considering it, I know.” Research the best ways to raise the valley’s natural fruits, as well as the seeds Pierre brought in, and concoct her own signature taste of Stardew Valley.

Sebastian pressed his face into his hands. Sighed, yet again, and deeply enough he risked deflating completely.

How could he, inactive, dull, and unenthusiastic, ever be good enough for someone so proactive, so imaginative, so ambitious? Never mind supporting her!

What can I do? What could I do? What should I do?

His mother’s words struck him through the desperate scrabble of his thoughts: You should go visit her.

Swiping the invoices off his table, Sebastian shot up the stairs and out the house. He vaguely heard Demetrius calling to him—Be back in time for dinner, alright?—but honestly? Proactivity like the decision Sebastian had just made, no matter how small, deserved a reward, like no curfew.

He veered around the corner of the yard toward the backwoods road, his steps faster than usual as cool springtime air encouraged his pace. Remnants of dewy morning still lingered like a fragrant mist, and for once in his life, Sebastian tasted the sweetness in the air. His emboldened steps spooked the rabbits hiding under the shades of their bushes, but instead of bolting away, they watched him pass with their glassy, unblinking eyes and twitching noses. The clover patches nearby, Sebastian guessed, enticed them more than the possibility of human interruption.

He passed over the terminating asphalt out of town, the same road that had taken him and Kutone out to his favorite overlook, to the place she’d first told him, “You saved me.”

He stopped on that overpass, birdsong screeching above him. Maybe, all he wanted was to hear her prove him again. To hear her tell him he was good enough for her. But another voice protested—you won’t believe her until you feel it yourself.

But what would that take?

Familiar barks blew away the clouds of his thoughts. Sebastian had barely glanced up from the ground when Oki’s golden form bounded up the steps from the Banks, and eagerly circled Sebastian’s legs. Panting and nosing around Sebastian’s shoes, the dog batted his bushy tail until he finally earned a chuckle, as well as a casual scratch down his back. With an approving snuffle, Oki turned and barked back down the steps, bringing Kutone skidding around the corner.

Her admonishment faltered when she reached the top of the steps. Placing her gloved hands on her hips, she breathed out mock exasperation. “Oki,” she said, “you can’t keep using Sebastian as your out for bouncing through our new strawberry crops.”

“Is he really smart enough to know I’d bail him out?” Sebastian snickered. “Or is he just lucky?”

“A bit of both, to be honest. He just knows how to play Dumb Dog.” The slight curve at the corner of her lip betrayed her sarcasm, as Kutone next crossed her arms. “So what brings you out of hibernation?”

“An end to the projects,” said Sebastian, handing Kutone the invoices, “and some bills for you.”

She pulled off a glove, and with a playful snatch, accepted the paperwork. “More like, funding for your family’s dinner tonight?”
“Plus materials and labor—being the primary provider for the family takes a toll on the at-home relationships, you know?”

Kutone clicked her tongue at Oki, summoning the retriever to follow her heels as she turned and ventured back down to the Banks. “Ignore him,” she snorted, “because he’s being a brat.”

Oki’s responding whines were completely indiscernible, but Kutone seemed to hear words. Mocking a stricken expression, she turned her nose up and huffed. “So you’re going to betray me, Oki? After I fed and bathed and loved you? Whatever, then. ‘Bros before hoes’—is that how that goes?”

“Except,” Sebastian interjected, catching Kutone by her shoulder. “you’re not a whore.”

Kutone rolled her eyes. “Are we doing this again?”

“No, you’re doing this again. Putting yourself down and making yourself the undeserving, unimportant party.”

“Truth’s a constant bitch, you know.”

“Then I guess I have to be bitchier. Makes me glad I decided to stop by.”

With a snort, Kutone waved the invoices again. “You’re here to bill me, Sebastian.”

“As well as come see you—I don’t need to prove that statement, do I?” He gestured back toward the farm. “What were you working on?”

At this, Kutone’s simper brightened into a beaming grin. Stars practically twinkled in her dark eyes. “Experiments,” she said. “Pierre delivered some saplings I’d ordered over the winter.”

Rolling up the invoices and shoving them into her back pocket, she darted back down the steps, leaving Sebastian with no choice but to follow. Kutone’s infectious enthusiasm had Sebastian curious, but upon passing the farm’s fenced, tilled, and sown fields, and meeting Kutone at the front steps of her house, he found his proactivity blurring, “I can help, if you need it.”

With an agreeing grunt, Kutone slid a sapling onto a wheelbarrow. Blowing her hair and sweat out of her face, she nodded purposefully to the tree. “Good,” she huffed, “because this has been a bitch to do on my own. Grab the trunk.”

He closed his hand around the sapling, smooth and firm bark unyielding under his palm. Suggesting he push the cargo while Kutone steadied it was out of the question. Kutone’s infectious enthusiasm had Sebastian curious, but upon passing the farm’s fenced, tilled, and sown fields, and meeting Kutone at the front steps of her house, he found his proactivity blurring, “I can help, if you need it.”

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He closed his hand around the sapling, smooth and firm bark unyielding under his palm. Suggesting he push the cargo while Kutone steadied it was out of the question. After all, the past year of farming, mining, and running around the valley had hardened Kutone’s stamina to what Sebastian considered god-tier, at least in comparison to him.

He second-guessed himself. Maybe he should have at least offered, instead of assuming Kutone had the heavy lifting under control. Yet, saying anything now, as Kutone levered the wheelbarrow up onto its wheel and shoved off, would put him in a disingenuous light. Right? Well, no, he tried arguing. Kutone understood herself, her property, and her needs more than he ever could gather—by following her command, he was respecting her space and her lead.

Right?

Was he doing anything right by her?

They had crossed from the main farm plot, over to a small island, and then again to the largest island of the Banks. Setting the wheelbarrow down for a rest, Kutone pointed toward the far west side of
the island, where her cows—“Daisy, Jazzy, Bethany, and Stussy”—grazed in the tall grasses. “They
tend to keep closer to the cliffs,” she said. “I’m thinking I’ll relegate their space to the two islands
shoved up against those cliffs, and use this area as an orchard.”

“You said ‘experiments,’ though.”

Kutone grasped the handles of the wheelbarrow again, and heaved up as Sebastian steadied the
sapling. “I’ve never planted fruit trees.”

Everything about the Banks, she explained, had been one massive experiment. Farming, ranching,
building, planning—all imperative behind-the-scenes work, but necessary she mastered. “Unlike
you,” she said, “I have no plans to head into the city.”

She lately jabbed him like this a lot more often. Clearly, Sebastian understood, feeling vindictive,
though she never elaborated further. “Not even to visit your parents?”

Kutone ground the balls of her feet into the dirt, rolling the wheelbarrow into motion. “Not for a
while, at least. They’ll probably come visit me before I go to them.”

“They must miss you,” he said. “And if I do move out there, I’m gonna need some help to find a
place to stay.”

Rolling her eyes at Sebastian, she shook her head. “That what you’re friends with Rhei for, right?”
They’d crossed to a cleared plot, with five other saplings, roots and soil protected with some kind of
sack covering. Stopping a short distance from the others, Kutone let the wheelbarrow rest again. She
waved Sebastian back, and setting her own steadying grip on the sapling, tilted the wheelbarrow
forward. With the lip of the wheelbarrow resting in the dirt, she shoved the sapling out onto the
ground. “As you can see, I’m too busy figuring out my own mess here.”

“One Winter Star card doesn’t make us friends,” Sebastian muttered.

Kutone kept her eyes on Oki, clamping his jaws around a shovel she’d left by one of the other
saplings. As the retriever dragged the shovel and dropped the handle into Kutone’s waiting hand, she
responded, “But you’ve been keeping in touch with him?” With a grunt, she stabbed her shovel into
the ground, turning up loamy soil. “Getting out there’s all about networking—nothing wrong with
it.”

“And yet you sound so bitter.”

At a point she’d dug a rough hole for her new sapling, Kutone slackened her grip on her shovel.
After a moment’s pensive stare at the hole, she shot a challenging glare, and tossed the shovel into
Sebastian’s hands. The unexpected weight nearly pitched Sebastian forward into the ground, but a
lucky stumble kept him upright. “How personally,” she mused, albeit with a chuckle, “are you taking
my tone of voice?”

Sebastian rolled up his sleeves, as he reflected on the question. “It’s nothing new,” he said. “So not
‘personally.’”

Kutone handed him a spare pair of work gloves. “Sounds like a ‘but…’ in there.”

They knelt over the hole, Kutone pushing clods of soil aside with her hands, while Sebastian
widened it with the shovel. Next to them, Oki assisted the digging operation, tail brushing back and
forth through the flurry of soil. With the spring sun climbing higher, dazedness needled at the corners
of Sebastian’s consciousness. Sweat beaded at his forehead and slipped down his face, enough he
had to pause often to use his bunched sleeves as makeshift towels. Taking off his sweatshirt would
be a good idea, but his prickling thoughts convinced him otherwise. It was a new, meditative kind of state that allowed clarity into his previously muddled mind. “I guess I’m concerned,” Sebastian finally responded. “Neither of us is necessarily any good at expressing ourselves. We’ve been independent for so long that—well, maybe it’s just me.”

Kutone stopped, leaning over the hole and staring instead at the sapling waiting to move into its new home. “Go on,” she said.

He examined her features. She blinked intermittently, despite her own sweat dripping through her eyelashes. The strain of her recent heavy lifting flushed her cheeks to a healthy rosiness, and had her heaving deep, audible breaths. “Remember how you said before, you wanted to do good for my sake?” This earned him a slight cock of her head, and her eyes finally on him. “I’ve been thinking—that kind of feeling has to be mutual. Reciprocated.”

Her coffee-brown eyes widened, allowing the spring sun to shine on them. “You’re saying you don’t feel the same way?”


Even though he knew he made no sense, Kutone held her gaze on him. She sighed, not in exasperation, but in a breath of contemplation. “You think,” she tried again, “you’re not doing good enough for my sake, but you desperately want to.”

“I guess that’s the best way to put it. You’re the mentally sound, straight-thinking adult between the two of us, and I feel like I’m desperately clawing my way to get to your level.”

“As if I’m any higher than you.” As Sebastian eyed her with an inquisitive frown, Kutone stood from her kneel at the lip of the hole, and circled around to a position behind and below the sapling’s lowest branches. Clenching one hand around the sapling’s unyielding trunk and pressing her other hand on the sapling’s burlap-like covering, she nodded Sebastian over. She waited until Sebastian got into the same position, and with a preparatory breath, heaved. “Look at us!” she grunted through Oki’s encouraging barks. “Pushing this goddamn peach sapling into a hole together—I wouldn’t ask you do this if we weren’t already equals!”

“This is nothing! At least—shit, this is heavy!—compared to our collective issues!”

“But here’s the thing!” The sapling’s bottom dragged over the lip of the hole. At its tilt, Kutone leaped around and steadied the tree. “I’ve had some farming experience now!” They heaved together. The sapling tilted forward again, forcing Sebastian to both pull and push on their cargo. “Versus, this is your first time?”

“Something like that!”

One final lurch, and the sapling fell into the hole. Yelping and cursing at the branches snagging their hair and catching their clothes, Sebastian and Kutone—still steadying the sapling with one hand—collapsed to the ground. Breathing through her nose and out her mouth, Kutone’s breath became a raspy laugh. “Look at us,” she said. “I’m supposed to be the more experienced one, and I’m just as—whew—winded, as the newbie.”

He could feel the dirt grinding into the back of his head, as he laid on the ground and stared at the sky. Arms sprawled, eyes heavy, and his numbed body begging for better blood flow, Sebastian couldn’t remember the last time one task had taken so much out of him. Walking down that mountain road and across the valley was apparently nothing compared to the toil of Kutone’s work. “At least
“The sapling is my crutch.” Gingerly releasing her grasp, and noting the sapling’s stability, Kutone fell back onto the ground next to Sebastian. “And once I let go, I’m just as tired as you.” She laid back, resting her head against his shoulder. “Damn. It’s gonna be a long day with these stupid things.”

His pulse thrummed against her temple, yet she made no comment on it. A part of him believed Kutone heard his heartbeat as an echo of her own. Her silence, however, in the pace of her breath matching the rhythm of his pulse, told him she was—in a sense—using his body to balance her own. It was a nice thought. “You’re going to need to come up with a better system for getting these in the ground.”

“We’re,” she corrected. “We’re going to think of something better.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s right. Sorry.” He realized, he’d never really looked up at the sky like this. Never saw the smoky cirrus clouds through sapling boughs like this, or even, through the pine needles and oak leaves of the mountain trail. “I shouldn’t apologize for that.”

Kutone, rolling over to sky-watch as well, gave no indication she understood his train of thought. That was alright; he didn’t really need her to understand this one.

“What if,” Sebastian started instead, “we use the wheelbarrow a bit better?”

She moved slightly, cocking her head again in thought. “Elaborate.”

“We move it so that when you tilt it, the sapling can just sort of, slide into the hole. You and me can hold it steady so it doesn’t tip over and snap or something.”

He turned to find Kutone with her eyes narrowed, likely simulating his suggestion in her head. “Okay,” she said, “but you notice it didn’t exactly slide out so smoothly earlier—we still had to push it out.”

“Well, we’ve already established you’re the muscle between the two of us. Long as it sits on that incline, I think you could push it off easy enough.”

“Easy enough,” Kutone echoed, huffing. “But it’s worth a shot. After we finish this one we sort of abandoned.”

They sat up, Sebastian already groaning. “My blood’s running like sludge, and my body’s already screaming at me like a lunatic in a horror game.”

Kutone levered herself up to her feet. Snatching up the shovel with one hand, she offered the other to Sebastian. She easily pulled him up, never loosening her grip until he steadied himself. “Just like me on Day 1,” she said with a broad smile. Then handing the shovel to Sebastian, she got back on her knees and pulled off the sack protecting the sapling’s roots. Throwing it aside, she then began shoving dirt back into the pit. “Stop if you feel like puking. I’ll grab us some water after this.”

“I can keep up.” Even he heard the defiance in his voice, as he packed the loamy soil down. “I could even like this after a while.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it, liar.”

With the soil smoothened over the sapling’s roots, and the sapling itself standing upright, Sebastian and Kutone stepped back. “Yeah,” Sebastian replied after a proud, affirming nod, “I think I might
prefer watching you do this, than actually doing it myself.”

“No offense taken,” Kutone laughed. “But that was only the first of three peach trees, and three orange trees. Apple and pomegranate saplings are arriving tomorrow.”

A breeze wavered across the Banks, lightly rustling the baby boughs of the first peach sapling. Along with the breeze, came the distant melody of birdsong. Kutone’s pet retriever, panting in approval, circled the newly planted tree before dashing off across the farmland. So, more trees to plant between today and tomorrow, huh? Kutone even insinuated she’d draft his help, with or without his approval. The thought made Sebastian chuckle, even with dirt and sweat plastering his clothes to his back, and his entire being aching in protest. “How long until we start seeing some fruits to this labor?”

Kutone wiped sweat off her lip, and settled her hands on her hips. “A season or two? Provided I figure out what I’m doing.” She shrugged, gesturing across the land. “Like I said, these are experiments.”

After another moment of marveling the sapling, Kutone started off toward the next plant. “We,” Sebastian blurted. Noticing her stop and turn around, he gestured again to the sapling. “Provided we figure out what we’re doing.”


And he needed hers.

Sebastian rolled up his sleeves again, and dragged himself to the next tree.
Stars in the Dark

Chapter Notes

It is some ungodly hour of the night.

I may have a shpiel in me but I'm just going to leave this with my usuals.

Because seriously, thank you all so much for your patience. Your love. Your kudos and comments and bookmarks, even those hits. Thank you.

Some few days later found Kutone, arms held up and parallel to the floor, with Emily winding measuring tape around her chest, waist, and hips. Confused as she was, she recognized the occasion as a dress outfitting—but for what?

After comparing different fabrics to Kutone’s tanning skin tone, the giddy sisters finally decided on a beautifully gossamer bolt of fabric as the overskirt to the summery flow of a hemmed dress. At least, Emily assured, she would have it perfectly hemmed in time for the dance.

Frowning, Kutone raised a brow. “You don’t mean the Flower Dance, do you?”

“Of course I mean the Flower Dance!” Emily chirped back. How she did it through the pins pursed between her lips, Kutone had no idea. “The end of spring is one of the valley’s most beautiful occasions, you know. I’d hate for you to miss it.”

This statement had Haley chewing her lip, and Kutone, amused. “I deliberately left myself out of the occasion last year.”

“Then this year, you’ll have no excuse to do so!”

Was it a curse or a blessing? Kutone grudgingly leaned toward blessing. Maybe, she figured, helping Haley find her lost bracelet at the beach resulted in this reward. Yet she dreaded the limelight, as the Flower Dance would likely thrust over her—not due to her memories associated with attention, but due to the sheer overstimulation. Stage fright? No. More like, envisioning the effort of fielding away the townspeople’s conversations already drained Kutone to the marrow of her nerves.

She rolled her neck and shoulders against the tightening pain from standing still for so long. “Look,” Kutone sighed, “don’t get me wrong. I appreciate you doing this for me, but it might not be necessary.”

At this, Haley slammed her hairstyle magazine shut, and curled her lip. “Of course it’s necessary!” she said. “Last year was last year. But you can’t live in the valley and be this hidden fashion gem without getting a dance in at the spring festival!”

“Hidden fashion gem? Are you alright, Haley?”

With a huff, Haley tossed the waves of her blonde hair, and snapped open her magazine again. “You’ve gotten better since when we first met.”

Emily, quivering with restrained laughter, shook her head, as Kutone replied, “Can’t say I can see or
feel the difference—or maybe that’s your perspective talking?”

Fuming Haley crossed her arms, while Emily, unable to contain herself, dropped her pins laughing. “I’m sure,” she said, leaning away from Kutone’s dress, “Haley meant that you’ve made Stardew Valley a part of yourself. The sun, the air, the water, the magic that lives here—they all suit you much better than when you first moved in.”

A groan visibly blew out of Haley. “For Yoba’s sake—we’re moving on!” Lip still curled in indignance, she crossed her arms. “I still don’t think pink is the right color for her!”

Emily let another laugh subside first, before she stood up and stepped away from her project. “I thought it matched her eyes well,” she replied. Strokes of insight and imagination turned her pensive expression into a wide grin. “Especially when the sun hits her eyes—that soft pink will practically glow!”

“But what about her hair—alright, look at this, okay?!” Snatching up a different magazine, Haley skimmed through the pages, until she hit her reference. Triumphantly snorting, she shoved the open pages into Emily’s face. “I can get her hair into that silky style, see! And I’d mainly do her eyes and lips—not the whole works like this, but she’ll be a princess by the time I’m done with her!”

Both Kutone and Emily turned dumbstruck stares to Haley, but it was Emily who voiced their sentiment. “And you, Haley, would be okay with that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? I’m still the Flower Queen.”

But she’d entertained the idea of allowing someone else a chance in the limelight. Uncertain Kutone turned her gaze down to the flowing pleats of the dress. Pink was not her color; she agreed with Haley on that front. But “the works?” Makeup and styled hair, along with an apparently custom spring dress? Sure, some giddy, girlish part of Kutone had considered using the Flower Dance as an excuse to glam up and floor Sebastian into incoherent silence—but the budding realization of this fantasy also carried the scent of danger. Would her old flirting habits come back? Would she purposely ask Alex for the first dance, just to mess with Sebastian? And then, would she blame her decision on having too much of Pam’s spiked punch and ruin whatever good thing she’d built with Sebastian?

The what-ifs alone made her stomach turn a queasy flip. Sighing, she shook her head. “Guys, look—this really is unnecessary. I have some dresses stashed away in my closet, so I’ll wear one of those—!”

“Nonsense!” Emily shot. “Not when we finally have the funding from the Mayor to update the Flower Dance!”

Funding? So that’s where the Junimos took her cash…

“And especially not when I’m in charge of costuming!” Haley added. “If you want me to coordinate you with your boyfriend, we need to make sure you’re perfect first, got it?”

Kutone shrugged and absently brushed down the skirt. “As if Sebastian would really sit through this.”

“God, you’re just as gloomy as him—no wonder you’re a thing. But get this…” Haley winked, and flashed a smug sneer. “I already asked all the guys to let me outfit them for this dance. Soon as I told Sebastian I’d make sure he matched you, he was all for it.”

Either Haley was telling the truth or this was a bulletproof bluff. Kutone had no way of calling it. On
top of that, despite her skeptical frown, her inner child bounced and blushed with glee. Sebastian? Agreeing to the full Emily and Haley fashion treatment, for the one festival he hated to the darkest pits of his icy steel heart? For Kutone’s sake?

She felt Emily’s and Haley’s probing stares. Felt the rush of fantasy heating her cheeks and ears bright red. For crying out loud, how could an adult get this flustered over an outfit and makeup for a silly community dance? Yet, embarrassed as Kutone was, she glanced up. “I think a mauve or lavender color would be best,” she whispered. “To match my hair.”

Haley jabbed a sharp nudge into Emily’s arm, as she squealed, “See! I told you!”

“And, uh… I get sun rash down my arms…”

Emily clasped her hands together. “I’ll make sure you have arm gloves to go with your dress then! You won’t mind some silver decorations, I hope?”

“Yes! Yes! Now we’re talking!” Haley cried. She brought up the magazine again. “Emmy, this style will do it, don’t you think?”

“Elegant, yet airy,” mused Emily. She pressed a finger to her chin. “Like the tail end of a spring breeze in the dewy morning. Poetic.” Picking up a roll of mauve fabric, she turned again to Kutone. “Let’s do it. You can think of a proper accessory while I cut and hem this for you.”

A proper accessory. Kutone inwardly echoed. Most likely for her neck—spring dresses were always good matches with chokers or necklaces. She’d never been a woman for jewelry, though. Precious gems and their flecked, faceted faces reminded Kutone too much of backstabbing best friends. Sickening.

Yet her thoughts skimmed back to a recent museum visit, just some couple days ago after Sebastian had helped her with the orchard—

—It was because he’d heard the museum at the Pelican Town library had gems, gadgets, and old weaponry excavated from the mines. Of course knowing Kutone was behind the majority of the donations, Sebastian wanted to see the fruits of her labor for himself. Something about vicariously living her adventurous life, by listening to her stories on how she found each artifact.

“It’s not that hard,” Kutone had said, shrugging. “Take a sword and pickaxe and you could probably find something too.”

“You remember,” Sebasian replied, “that I could barely nudge a damn sapling into place.”

“You don’t need to be physically strong to survive down there. You have to be smart.”

“It worries me that you make it sound so easy.”

“What, because now you’re getting ideas?” huffed Kutone. They’d stopped at a sizable deposit of obsidian, displayed in a case under the museum’s gallery lights. As though it still carried remnants of its volcanic memories of home, its glassy gloss shined like a hearth. For a while, she watched Sebastian mesmerized by the rock’s black streaks, until she sighed. “Sebastian, if you want me to get something for you, you could just tell me.”

“I know.”
He backed up from the display and continued ambling down the aisle, as he perused the exhibits. A fleeting silence set in, until Sebastian stopped in front of the display for a glittering Frozen Tear. “Did you ever find anything you ended up liking so much, you had a hard time donating it?”

Kutone turned in place, glancing at each display in thoughtful contemplation. Aquamarine? No. Amethyst? Purple was her color, so maybe, but, no. The other women of Pelican Town might have argued for rubies, emeralds, or diamonds, but Kutone stopped at none of these gems. Then, the Frozen Tear, just like Sebastian?

Apparently not, though she gave him a knowing simper. With a shake of her head, she brushed past him further down the aisle.

A fond smile turned up the corner of her lips, as she stopped again. “I like the colors of these,” she began, gesturing to the display cases before her. An icy aura surrounded the steely blue facets of a Ghost Crystal in one case, while the peridot chips of the Ocean Stone next to it glowed in iridescent shades, like fish scales. Kutone, though dazzled by the gems, shook her head again. “But I gave these up pretty easily.” She turned a troubled look to Sebastian. “Never thought this would be so difficult.”

“You’re a minimalist,” said Sebastian. “I guess you wouldn’t you feel much attachment to gems or minerals.”

“Like that emerald Alex gave me. There was one, though.” She’d stopped again, examining the curls and blooming structure of a Fairy Stone. “One that I saw and fell in love with. It was…”

Her gaze went to the furthest end of the exhibits. As the crystal’s prismatic sheen dazzled her through its rose-colored surface, Kutone’s features brightened. “Its shape—it reminds me of a twinkling star,” she breathed, hurrying her steps to the display. “And according to Gunther, no scientist has been able to figure out how exactly they’re made, almost like they’re not even of this world. Maybe that’s why I love these so much.”

Sebastian made his way to Kutone’s side, and leaned down to read the placard—

—“Star Shards.”

It was a long elevator ride down, and Sebastian a roiling sourness curdled in the back of his throat. It was the type he hadn’t felt since the last time Demetrius had pissed him off, the type of sourness that needed a good long smoke to alleviate, but alas, with no ventilation in the mine’s elevator, along with the already-nauseating cloud of garlic hanging in the air, a cigarette would have done nothing except made him angrier.

He really needed to chill right the fuck out, just as Abigail, chewing her lip next to him, noted, so he’d tried civil conversation. “I’m looking for Star Shards.”

The source of the pungent garlic, as well as Sebastian’s oncoming aneurysm, was none other than the third member of this spelunking party: Alex, equipped with a menacing sledgehammer over his shoulder, and a ratty green jacket instead of his usual letterman. Instead of opening a bottle of garlic oil, like adventurers normally chose to keep monsters at bay, he’d opted for chewing on a clove of garlic like it was a wad of gum.

“So that’s why we’re heading for the lava caverns,” Alex mused. “Look, I don’t mind teaming up, but we need a strategy briefing before we go putting ourselves out there, you know?”
Abigail, who was supposed to have gotten Sam to do this, ground her elbow deep into Sebastian’s arm. “C’mon,” she hissed, “man up a little, would you?”

“That’s not even a problem here,” said Sebastian. “The problem is—!”

_I could have slept with him…_ Who knew one person’s words could haunt him so badly?

“—The problem,” Alex sneered, “is that you think whatever we find down here, I’m going to use to steal your girl.”

A low slap and groan sounded from Abigail, while Sebastian breathed out a long, steadying sigh. “No.”

“But I mean, she told you, didn’t she? That I tried to make a move on her? So by inviting me to come along with you guys on this treasure hunt, we get to decide if you’re really the man for her.”

“I—!” Sebastian gagged, trying again to keep his emotional temperature below boiling. Tried to keep the images of Kutone with Alex out of his head. “No. I know she only sees you as a friend, and you only agreed to do this because of whatever excuse Abigail came up with.”

Abigail finally interjected. “The whole town knows you gave Kutone raw emerald, Alex! That means you went down to the lava caverns—where only Kutone has been able to get to and survive—futzed around there for a while, and came back up. Sam chickened out, and you’d be a good resource. At least, I thought you’d be good to have on the team.”

Sebastian rubbed his temple. Sam chickened out—what a cover. More like, his father had only just come back from a stint in the war, with glaring cracks in his psyche. Rather than possibly deepening those cracks by risking a run in the mines, Sam had decided to stay safe upstairs and try to keep his family together.

Alex, meanwhile, ran a hand through his hair. “Well,” he started, “thanks for that, I guess.”

Robin had commented before on the disappearance of Alex’s arrogance. Apparently, not even a gridball conversation could summon that characteristic bluster anymore. Townspeople got “thank you” and “I’ll help” more often from Alex than ever before—or maybe he’d always been that nice of a guy, but his professional sports dreams had overshadowed those niceties into obscurity. At least Alex could redeem himself.

Regarding himself, however… Good grief, this was dealing with Rhei all over again.

Except, unlike dealing with Rhei—or more like, dealing with the image of the perfect partner for Kutone—Alex had the added thorn of being a constant local. Someone that, should Sebastian fail to deliver, Kutone could easily make good on her word. …Could sleep with Alex. Maybe it was her influence that toned him down in the first place. How close did they get, that Alex had entertained the concept of a relationship with Kutone? What kinds of time did they spend together?

With another gag, Sebastian took a sharp inhale of the mine’s slowly smoldering air. Star Shards, he told himself. She loved Star Shards. And he had a simple plan. Maru had the hardware to cut gems, and he already had the silk cord and metal links and mount to put together. With a few pointers on metalworking from Maru, he could have a Star Shard necklace for Kutone in time for the Flower Dance.

He hoped she’d wear it often.

But to get to the main ingredient, he needed help. “I know I’ll need to find magma geodes,” said
Sebastian, “and hope for the best when we take them to Clint to process them.”

“Or,” Alex cut in, “if you don’t mind risking an amateur’s hand, you could save the money and I’ll smash them open while we’re down here.”

Sebastian eyed the sledgehammer over Alex’s shoulder. “We’ll see how many we find first. I think we’ll be needing that more for crowd control.”

Alex blinked, confusion stunting his words. “Crowd…?”

“Gaming term,” Abigail remarked. “It means you’re in charge of swarms. Smash that thing into the floor and I bet you could blow ‘em all away.”

The creaking elevator finally jerked to a stop. Heat from the caverns turned the metal box into veritable oven, forcing Alex and Abigail to tear off their jackets as they stepped off onto the uneven floors. Even Sebastian pulled his sweatshirt off, earning amused stares from both of his party members.

“Like goddamn snow,” Alex snorted. “But decently nice arms, dude. Never thought you’re the type to work out.”

“I don’t—!”

“We think it’s the work he does on his motorcycle,” Abigail chirped, flipping her sword upright. “Or maybe he’s starting to, for Kutone.”

The heat, Sebastian decided, was already getting to him. Sweat already trickled down his neck and pooled in the small of his back. “Can we just do this,” he grumbled, “and get out of here?”

Alex turned toward the yawning tunnels of the caverns, as a determined smirk stretched across his features. “Right. Abigail, you take the back. Keep an eye out for us out there, and I’ll keep my eyes ahead. Be ready for a hand-off if it gets too dangerous.”

Abigail took her turn to blink dumbly, while Sebastian groaned again and shoved past Alex. “For God’s sake, Alex, Ab’s not your fucking running back, and I’m not a goddamn gridball.”

“You might as well be, if you don’t have some kind of weapon on you.”

“Trust me,” said Sebastian, leveling an icy side-eye toward Alex, “I know how to use mine.”

They ventured down heated tunnels, the red gleams of lava shining the path ahead, albeit in murky light. Their scuffing steps in the dark echoed down the rocky walls, held somewhat precariously by wooden beams and posts across the ceiling. From time to time, they stopped at deposits of stone and geode nodes, using both Alex’s hammer and a pickaxe in Sebastian’s offhand.

“A mining job might not be too bad,” said Alex, as Sebastian gathered up the excavated geodes into a rucksack.

“What’s stopping you?” Undoubtedly, thought Sebastian, and finally, Alex’s usual pro sports bluster was coming.

Surprisingly, Alex sounded an exasperated snort instead. “Grandpa ended up in a wheelchair because of his mining job.” He wiped sweat from his brow. “I think he’d flip right out of it if I told him I wanted to do this full time.”
Even Abigail, clipping a wayward bat’s wings with the edge of her sword, flashed an impressed grin. “Imagine if George ended up standing, though. You could say you cured him!”

Alex slung his hammer back over his shoulder, sighing, “What I wouldn’t give for that,” as he started down the tunnel again.

Abigail brushed past Sebastian. “I can kinda see why Haley liked him for so long.” She gave a wink. “Definitely not just because of those reliable shoulders and arms, right?”

Sure, Sebastian inwardly replied. Nice guy, and he made the tanktop-and-denim outfit look especially good. How did Kutone not take advantage of her catch? Growling at himself, he smashed his pickaxe into a nearby wall, the hollow clang piercing his thoughts and down the mine shaft.

Wrong move.

A wind pulled behind him, followed by an ominous chant. The rustles of heavy, marching footsteps stirring the mine shaft’s dust sounded next, and before Sebastian could shout ahead, a swirl of shadow barreled into him. His breath shooting out of him in a choking whoosh, he flew into Abigail’s back, instantly earning her scream and Alex’s surprised yelp.

“Shit, the garlic wore off—back me up, Abigail!”

After helping a choking Sebastian to his feet, Abigail dashed into the brute smashing its fists into Alex’s every swing. The red glow of lava shined along the singing metal of her sword, as she pivoted in and slashed up. But as quickly as that brute disintegrated into a cloud of shadows, another bore down on her immediately, pushing against the flat of her blade.

At this, Alex smashed his hammer into the floor, the sheer force rocking the ground and walls hard enough to unsteady their assailants. Abigail scrabbled back from her position, only to end up tripping over a scuttling lava crab. Its claws caught her ankles, but with a hiss, Abigail shot back up into a circular slash, severing the offending appendages from its owner.

“Stay low, Abs, I got you!” But another wind blasted forth, buffeting Alex mid-swing. Just as the flat of his hammer smashed back into the floor, lances of smoke and shock surrounded him in binding agony. Abigail, bracing herself against the pain with a spirited war cry, launched herself at the shaman casting its spell over Alex’s bind. Sword held steady and low for stab, she’d almost made her mark, until another shadow lunged from the darkness, fist held high.

Abigail saw the end—a fist breaking her back, Alex crushed to death, and Sebastian? Yoba above, only a miracle could keep him from ending up a smear on the wall. She squeezed her eyes shut. Apologized to Mom and Dad. Prayed for that end to be swift, the pain instantaneous.

Yet she never heard the snap. Instead, there came a pained yelp and the whish of dissipating clouds. Resistance against the tip of her sword, and an agonized, yet muffled, cry—a scream from behind a mask. Alex’s relieved sigh, his angry shout, and another crushing blow against the earthen floor.

The sound of metal hitting the floor. Sebastian’s irritated sigh. “You all keep thinking I can’t do this…”

Both Alex and Abigail looked up, to find Sebastian with one hand hovering over his side, and the other brandishing a dagger. His icy glare seemed to summon frosty crystals along the blade, as he muttered again to himself, “I keep thinking I can’t do any of this, but I’m here doing it, aren’t I?”

His wrist whipped back, and snapped forward, the movement sending another metallic gleam hurtling into another shadowy face. Then he was like cold smoke, flashing to Abigail’s and Alex’s
aids with his dagger ready.

“The same thing as she does—and we’re all doing it. That’s some kind of proof, isn’t it?!”

Void spirits surrounded them from all sides, but back-to-back themselves, Alex, Abigail, and Sebastian faced the ring of hostile spirits. He should be scared, Sebastian thought. He should be wishing for help to swoop in and whisk them out of the mines. He shouldn’t be happy with the number of geodes they had. He should be worried about the cold numbing his fingertips and chilling his chest, and yet…

He felt so alive.

M. Rasmodius, wizard, heard news of a human-on-void spirits skirmish through the spirits of Stardew Valley, and for the first time in a long while, had made a mistake. Wrongly assuming the skirmish in the mines revolved around the young farmer at the Banks, he dismissed the ordeal as another possible chance to commission her for Void and Solar Essences.

But then, another whisper along the wind brought him disturbing news: it wasn’t Kutone in the mines. Three children of the valley, in fact, on a quest to find stars buried in the earth. One of them, the whispers continued, might have even awakened to powers beyond his own understanding, though that same child’s doubt would likely quash his awakening.

Rasmodius watched the beaten and torn children fight through the platoons of void spirits in the lava caverns. Watched them, fingers curled around and digging into the edges of his scrying table, with bated breath, as ice frosted the edges of the boy’s dagger, but Rasmodius couldn’t be damned to care about the Void boy’s awakening to his icy aspect.

The Void girl—Abigail—was she safe? Why did he care so much, and why was he cursing fate for not putting Kutone there with them—violent emotions like these hadn’t stirred in him since the curse that befell his ex-wife.

But he kept watching, as a protector ought, waiting for that terrible point when he had no choice but to glyph to the children’s aid and risk revealing his powers to the people of the valley. He rather liked the cover the townspeople provided, this image of the “crazy old man in the tower,” and much preferred to keep it.

They ran to the elevator. They smashed the buttons, urging the tin can to creak back up. Abigail could barely stand upright. Alex could barely keep her up under the bruises and strain of his own muscles. And Sebastian, despite the lava caverns still cooking the elevator, breathed out cold air. Held himself, shivering, probably thinking the adrenaline still rushed through him like a torrent.

Rasmodius relaxed his grip on the scrying table. The children were safe. Sebastian would need some help. Sealing, maybe. Absence-of, he decided, was still an intriguing subject indeed.
Singular Gift

Chapter Notes

Soooo before we get started, we have some lovely fanart from Pi! Depicting our heroine and her favorite boy in the middle of some hard spring labor, she really captured the essence of their interaction in Chapter 34, huh?

Slam that fave button for Pi, okay? Okay?! (I sure did.) And thank you very much, Pi!

Actually, thank you all for your continued support! Those hits, comments, kudos, and bookmarks all nourish my soul into writing more and more. Seriously. This chapter and the next weren't even in my original outline, for crying out loud!

And hey, if you want to ask me questions about the story or the characters or--heck--ask the characters anything, feel free to hit me up on my tumblr! Do it, seriously, I don't mind writing drabbles or short stories more often.

Pelican Town was in incensed whispers. For the good part of a week, concern and mystery buzzed through the valley air—someone saw Abigail with bandages around her ankles, another hadn’t seen Alex on his daily runs with Dusty, and yet another heard Sebastian had sequestered himself in his basement. “Yet another” referred to Sam, who, after trying and failing to check up on his best friend, had meandered down to the Banks to confide in who he hoped held more clues.

But Kutone had no answers, and just as many questions as Sam. For his sake, however, as well as her own anxiety, she stopped herself from mirroring Sam’s agitation. She set a cold can of cola on the table, and sat down across from him.

Sam traced swirls and zigzags across the cloudy surface of the can. “Thanks,” he mumbled, but made no move to open the drink. He sighed and scratched his head, his blonde hair settling like a dry, stringy mop. No rockstar gel artisanry today, not that Kutone could blame him.

“Robin asked me to let him rest for at least a week.” While she reached under the table to give Oki a half-hearted facial rub, she eyed a canvas tote bag slumped over her kitchen counter. “Harvey’s recommendation.”

“So much for doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“Did you try talking to Abigail or Alex?”

“Have you ever tried talking to a freaked-out Abigail?” Sam snapped up the tab on his cola, and took a mighty swig. “Pretty sure it was her that started the ‘oh my Yoba, Sebastian has ice powers’ fairy tale that’s been going around town.”

From what she’d seen around Stardew Valley, “ice powers” were hardly the strangest tale Kutone had heard. Which was why, instead of questioning the rumor, she had packed a hot canister of cider in the bag, and another canister filled with a spicy vegetable broth of her own design. “If Alex is saying the same thing…”

Sam slammed his fist onto the tabletop, spooking Oki underneath and nearly spilling his drink. “It
makes the entire story even weirder! Ab, Seb, and Jock Strap go into the mines—for what, no one’s saying or has a goddamn clue—they get beaten to shit and come back. It’s a standard story for anyone who’s not you or Marlon!”

“But the town’s in a tizzy about it because Sebastian’s lying so low.”

“And because Abby and Alex are telling the same exact story, and now my best friend’s locked himself up in his basement and won’t come breathe some air with me! Okay, look, I get it—everyone’s worried. But get this: I offer to buy him a pack and he wouldn’t even say ‘fuck off’! Some weaksauce ‘can’t’, and, that’s it!”

Good thing Sam was losing himself in his own tirade. Voicing his frustrations likely helped him unwind his tightly-coiled worry, but it also killed any curiosity he held regarding Kutone or her thoughts. As Sam took another gulp of his cola, Kutone’s thoughts went to the letter she’d found in her mailbox the morning after Sebastian, Abigail, and Alex had resurfaced from the mines. The telltale calligraphy had instructed her to keep the rest of the message unread until she had the chance to see Sebastian for herself. Supposedly, the wizard had business with both at the same time.

“I should have gone with them.”

Kutone leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “Now you’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m the party’s warrior, Kutone! I should have been there—Mom looked after Dad well enough, and Vince knew he had to keep cool, so I didn’t even need to stay home!”

“Vincent stayed cool because you were there. Jodi was able to look after Kent because you were there for your family. You can’t blame yourself for not being in two places at the same time.”

“But something would have turned out different. I’m not gonna say everything would have been good, but something would have been different.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” She leaned forward against the tabletop, as forlorn Sam stared into the dark lip of his soda can. “I could say the same thing—Marlon could say the same thing—and we still wouldn’t know for certain.

“Understand this, Sam—they’re okay. They’re alive. That’s what matters. Abigail and Alex need some time to recover, and we’re going to figure out what happened to Sebastian.”

Sam grumbled a half-hearted reply, swigged the last of his soda, and with a huff, slammed his empty can back on the table. Grumpy upset shadowed his features into a frown. “I swear I’m gonna throttle him when he decides to poke his head out that damn basement.”

Kutone snorted, drawing a hand over her face to hide her smile. “I’m sure he deserves it.”

He toyed and spun the can between his fingertips, before dragging his chair back and standing up with a sigh. “Look after him ’til then, will you? I’ll work with Abby, but promise me you’ll keep me posted on Seb.”

She stood up as well, stopping once at the kitchen counter and shouldering her bag before meeting Sam at the door. Shooing Oki back inside, she stepped out, closing the door behind them. “I’ll see what I can do,” she replied, adjusting the bag’s strap. “I promise though—Sebastian’s not as fragile as you think.”

Sam descended the veranda steps, and after a deep inhale, stretched his arms toward the sky. “That’s exactly why I get worried about him.” He stared at the milky clouds above, then shook his head. “He
thinks he can deal with whatever, and he can, most of the time. Then when he needs us most, he just 
sorta…” He drew his arm down, like a security door shutting closed. “Y’know?”

“I know.”

Likely because she was the same way, she knew that a shuttered spirit like Sebastian required a 
special kind of dedication. That had, after all, been the same magic he’d spun for her sake. 
Dedication, curiosity, a listening ear.

It was her turn to provide.

For the inhabitants of 24 Mountain Road, a dispirited, absent Sebastian usually spurred no alarm. 
Upon Kutone’s first steps into the house, normalcy appeared to reign, and yet, she caught Robin’s 
concerned glances toward the basement corridor. Demetrius worked in his laboratory with trench-
like furrows in his brow. Even Maru, on her way to the doctor’s office for her shift, paused by the 
steps, and pursed her lips as though restraining the shout she wanted to throw down into the 
basement.

So it was relief, Kutone knew, that unwound the tension in Robin’s shoulders as she welcomed 
Kutone inside. “He’s alive,” said Robin. After a quick shiver, she zipped up her vest and buried her 
hands in her pockets. “He comes up for meals and he seems normal enough.”

Kutone eyed the space heater behind the shop counter, and crossed her arms to hide the shudder of 

“I know. I know!” Robin covered her face with her hands. “At first I thought the insulation had 
busted somewhere in the house, but then I realized—I realized…” She sighed and dug her hands 
back into her pockets. “No. Even you wouldn’t believe me, would you, Kutone? I know you’ve 
seen so much here in the valley, but maybe you’ll tell me I’m being paranoid this time, but it’s just so 
noticeable—!”

“—Abigail’s been saying Sebby has ‘ice powers’ of some form?”

At this, Demetrius’s gruff shout reached the women. “It’s a biological anomaly!”

Robin rolled her eyes. “Demetrius is determined to find a ‘cure,’ but you can imagine what being 
called an ‘anomaly’ does to Sebby.”

It might have contributed to his self-mandated quarantine. “What do you think, Robin? As his 
mother?”

Robin buried her nose into the collar of her vest, and closed her eyes in contemplation. “I think…” 
She inhaled deeply, poked her head back out of her collar, and dropped her voice to a murmur. “I 
think Sebby’s eyes look so much like his dad’s.”

“Wait.” Kutone, boggled by the apparent tangent, adjusted her bag’s strap again. “What?”

“His father’s eyes,” Robin remarked. “I mean, Sebby’s always had such pretty eyes—cloudy, gray, 
foggy—right?”

“Right, but—?”

“—But then he comes back from the mines that day. They all went to Harvey’s, got bandaged up,
and we scolded them enough we probably crushed their spirits a little. And I look at Sebby and his eyes just—the fog’s cleared from them? And he has his father’s eyes, Kutone! Bright, nearly white, icy gray eyes—and that’s when I realized it’s become so cold, like we’re in the middle of winter again!”

The content of Robin’s panicked rambling shouldn’t have jarred Kutone so much. But this sudden talk of fathers and having the same eyes… Somehow, she felt like an intruder. Sebastian had said nothing else about his father, since that mid-autumn when Kutone asked about his motorcycle. “Dad” was never a subject in Sebastian’s talk, not even as an offhand remark, like the figure alone never existed from the beginning. Impossible, of course, but Sebastian’s alarming lack of regard for the subject deterred Kutone from asking further. She knew private, sensitive matters from the caginess of her own issues, after all. Why would she poke around about someone else’s, when she refused to open up about herself?

Oblivious to Kutone’s reservations, Robin puttered on. “It’s just like before,” she whispered. “When his father—uh—oh dear—it really is like before. It got cold then too. Winter in the middle of spring! He’d been so distant from both of us, and there was snow—Oh, Kutone, is Sebastian going to walk away too?! I know he’s been saying he wants to leave the valley, but is this how he’s going to do it?!”

Seeing the tears beading at the corners of Robin’s eyes, Kutone clutched Robin by her shoulders. “Slow down! Slow down, okay, Robin? I’m not here to say one or the other, but Sebastian’s downstairs, right?”

“Right.” Distressed Robin pressed her palms to her temples, and tried to breathe. “Right, Sebby’s downstairs. He’s resting. Working. One or the other. Just like always.”

“Just like always,” Kutone echoed. “Just like always. He hasn’t walked away, and he’s not going to walk away. Okay?”

They shared some deep breaths, until Robin shook her head. “O-okay.” Sprigs of her red hair sprung free from her ponytail, as she deliberately blinked and turned a baffled stare to Kutone. “Okay. Talk about a conniption, huh?”

“Let’s not,” Kutone replied. “But I’ve never seen you like that.”

Robin tried brushing her wayward strands of hair back into line. “A heck of an embarrassing fit.” She sighed again. “I’ve just been so worried about him...”

“Will you let me see him? Maybe I can figure something out.”

Signs of her distress still shaking her, Robin gestured to the corridor. “Harvey’s at a loss, Demetrius thinks he can make a scientific breakthrough, and Sebastian’s not talking. Maybe you’re the magic gate into the matter.”

Robin’s face, still pink with upset, squeezed into restrained sobs. “I’m so glad you’re here!”

Kutone’s thoughts, as she returned Robin’s tight embrace, flitted back to Sebastian’s words at the outlook over Zuzu City. How pathetically little it would matter to everyone... if I just left. Disappeared. All this worry over him, and he had no idea! Or maybe, he chose to ignore the concerns his closest paid him. Something superseded the opinions of his immediate circle. Hell, until Kutone had given him some form of proof, he hinged on disbelieving her as well! But for Robin, for Demetrius, for Maru, Sam, Abigail, and even the townspeople whispering to each other—that concern was the only proof they could provide.
Yet Sebastian remained ever so blind.

She left one last warm squeeze around Robin. “I’ll scold him as his girlfriend should,” she said. “He’ll come around.”

With a nod, Robin finally let Kutone go, and with the corner of her sleeve, patted away her tears. She crept into the hall with Kutone. “He’ll at least be happy to see you. I know it.” At the steps, she watched Kutone descend, before sauntering into the laboratory. Likely, Kutone figured, for Demetrius’s comfort. Hopefully he could read her teary face at this critical moment.

Puffs of her own breath came out cloudy white, as Kutone rapped her knuckles against Sebastian’s door.

“I didn’t lock it.”

She reached for the knob, but the sear of the metal’s iciness had her hissing in pain.

A shuffle behind the door responded, followed by a beleaguered, “Shit… is it that bad…?” Steps hurried, the door’s latch clicked, and Sebastian poked his wary face out. His ghostly pallor practically glowed, and his usually glossy hair had gone coarse and matted. The bags under his eyes were more like bruises, likely a result of persistent sleeplessness. Seeing Kutone wringing her hand, however, the exhaustion in his features cleared for just one second. “I thought I heard you upstairs,” he breathed.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Kutone replied. Astounded, she reached out to touch him. “My god, Sebastian, you look like hell.”

He ducked away from her touch and pressed one hand over his eyes to rub out the insomnia. It didn’t work. “I know. I know I do. Couldn’t sleep—can’t sleep, it goes out of control. I have to stay up else I’m going to freeze my entire family to death… And no.” Sebastian shot a pointed glare at the bag over Kutone’s shoulder. “No, there’s literally nothing you could do for me, and I don’t mean that to turn you away, Kutone, I swear.”

“You better take that back.” She reached into her bag and pulled out the canister of cider. The hot liquid inside sloshed about with her shaking. “Because I made some hot cider and a lovely soup to warm you up. Now let me in.”

Dumbfounded Sebastian stared at the canister in Kutone’s hand. His eyes—bright and icy as Robin noted—closed once as he shook his head. “For me,” he said, gesturing to the bag.

Kutone shrugged and spread her arms. “I’m here for you, Sebastian. I know I said something like that before. Maybe on some rainy autumn day, once upon a time?”

He chuckled. “That goes without saying.” After a moment’s regard, he threw open the door and yanked Kutone into his embrace. Drawing the quilt over him around Kutone as well, he buried his nose and lips into her hair. “You wouldn’t lie to me.”

“I meant it, so, my lord you’re cold!” She slid her arms around him anyway, and pressed her cheek against the frosted fabric of his sweatshirt. “And you smell!”

The longer he held her, his strength drained away. “Too tired,” he mumbled, slumping over Kutone. “Even the hot water… turned to…”

“Seb—Sebastian, wait—!”
He crumpled against her, buckling both to the floor in a tangle of quilt, bag, and Kutone’s squeak.

With sleep settling over Sebastian, however, his breath—visible puffs of air before—then frosted the strands of Kutone’s hair just before his lips. Cold spikes of pain blasted through Kutone’s nerves at every point of contact between them, but rather than risk Robin’s worry upstairs, she bit down her screams and moved. Hauling Sebastian over her shoulder, she dragged him to his bed, threw him down, and drew his comforter and quilt over him. She dragged a space heater closer to the bed and rubbed him down to the best of her strength, but nothing. Icy crystals still blew out of his mouth.

She would have considered it beautiful, if not for the blooming red patches of frostbite along her skin. “‘Biological anomaly’ my ass!” she hissed, rummaging through her bag. “If these aren’t goddamn ‘ice powers,’ I don’t know what it is!”

Her fingers crumpled the parchment of the wizard’s letter as she ripped it out. After one last glance at it, she gazed down at Sebastian. She’d seen him for herself, just as the letter demanded. Ice crystals propagated around him—his sleeping, Kutone decided, was too dangerous. For him, and for everyone in the house.

Blowing warm air onto her open palm, she raised her hand. “Baby, I’m sorry,” she muttered, “but you really are about to freeze me to death!”

A forlorn Sebastian, with a bright red handprint restoring some color to his features, sipped on a mug of hot apple cider. In between the moment he let himself fall asleep and the moment Kutone slapped him awake, he’d hurt her, and the crazy old man from the tower had somehow appeared in his room. He cast a dismal gaze down the red patches on Kutone’s face, arms, and even her hand pressed on his knee as she sat next to him.

She held a piece of parchment in her other hand. A letter, Sebastian realized, from the gossamer handwriting. Past the first crease of the letter, however, a sigil glowed, angrily, like flame-licked lava. A transport sigil, the crazy old man had boasted, that activated the moment Kutone opened the rest of the letter. Something like that. Sebastian found no desire in himself to express his doubts. “I’m sorry,” he breathed. He released one hand from his mug and gently traced Kutone’s frostbites. “I’m sorry, Kutone.”

As Kutone turned to reassure him, the crazy man spoke first. Amusement laced his voice. “Why apologize for your own awakening, boy? You understand you’re at a momentous crossroads, surely?”

Awakening? Exhaustion weighed heavier the more Sebastian tried parsing the man’s words into coherent statements.

After a long stare into Sebastian’s eyes, the man tipped the brim of his pointed hat over his eyes. “So you’ve yet to suspend your disbelief. Considering this valley’s history, I suppose this is merely an inevitability.”

Kutone turned her wrist and wove her fingers with Sebastian’s. She held him tight. Like always. “Talk, Rasmodius. What do I need to do?”

Rasmodius sniffed and stroked his purple beard. “Nothing, were it absolutely up to me. Either his Void eats him up completely and freezes him to death, or he makes the Void his own. This must sound familiar to you, Adept.”
Fatigue needled the corners of Sebastian’s consciousness, but he turned his gaze to Kutone. Her lips had hardened into a thin line. “What is he talking about?”

“Spirits’ Eve!” said Rasmodius, giving Kutone no chance to distract the conversation. “You must remember, boy, how she fell into a death-like sleep for nearly four days? Were she a born resident of the valley, I believe she might have awakened in a similar manner as you currently find yourself struggling with. Her powers might have involved the sea—!”

The exhaustion peeled back. “Powers?”

Kutone’s words hissed sharply. “Don’t give him ideas, Rasmodius! I nearly—!”

“—Or maybe she was purely shadow.” Rasmodius settled a silencing, dagger-like glare on Kutone. “The absolute abysses of the Void. She would have made an excellent Shadow Diviner.”

With a swish of his black robes and cape, Rasmodius turned to Sebastian’s computer desk, where his dagger and throwing knives lay in a veil of frost. He approached the desk in long, gliding steps, and picked up the sheathed dagger. Unsheathing the weapon, Rasmodius sighted along its double edge, hemming and hawing his approval. “Intriguing. Very intriguing. A legitimate sample of cold iron!”

Shadow Diviner. Cold Iron. Terms Sebastian found himself keeping up with. He noted Kutone’s confused expression. “It’s an alloy. Any metal and enchanted… Sweat broke out in an icy sheet down his back, as he met Rasmodius’s knowing simper. “…Enchanted ice.”

“Highly, highly effective against vanquishing Void Spirits and their undead cohorts, second only to anything infused with Solar Essence. The dwarves would forge this metal to use against the Spirits in their ancient war.” Rasmodius sheathed the blade, and set it ceremoniously back on the computer desk. “However, the dwarves had no means of procuring enchanted ice on their own—magic was not a blessing bestowed upon them. So they turned to a different source.”

“Stardew Valley.” Inside, Sebastian was screaming at himself. This entire thing was just a legend. A goddamn fairy tale. Of course he’d heard the stories about the ancient war: Dwarves on Void Spirits, warring over their racial differences and their territories. Magic and technology at odds and locking both sides into a perpetual stalemate. Human intervention became the key to settling a ceasefire. Folklore! Children’s books! Tabletop RPG games, for crying out loud! And yet, Sebastian went on, even with Kutone’s baffled stare on him. “The valley residents aligned with Void and manifested in ice…”

“I see your disbelief melting away, boy.”

And he hated it! He could hear the squeals of cracks stretching across his perception of his world, as well as the shattering in the distance. Now, of all times, he even liked Demetrius’s wording: biological anomaly. That was simple, and in-line with everything Sebastian knew about himself and the valley. “The valley residents,” he started again, breath trembling, “they produced enchanted ice through breath and touch. So long as they communed with the valley spirits…”

He grabbed that last bit of reality with every last ounce of his stumbling soul. “That’s it. This isn’t real; I’m dreaming—I don’t do any communing and I don’t know any valley spirits—!”

Rasmodius stroked his beard again. “Ah, but lovely Kutone does, doesn’t she?”

Sebastian watched the rebellious spirit leave Kutone’s features in a defeated pallor. “You can’t mean —!”

“—The Junimos,” said Rasmodius, waving one hand to the ceiling. A glowing sigil shone in the
space above Sebastian’s and Kutone’s heads, “bestow Stardew Valley with magic unlike any other province of this world. Their blessings enrich the children of the valley with a natural affinity for magic—all they ask for, in return, is gratitude, expressed in physical gifts to them, and between members of the community.”

Rasmodius flicked his other wrist, throwing the lock into the basement door’s knob. “Timeless spirits as them, however, do not understand the flow of change in relation to human time. Humans forget their debts. Stardew Valley lost its spirit of community and gratitude. Singular convenience took the place of joined effort. Magic, an unnecessary luxury that drew a segregating line between the haves and have-nots.”

Magic. He was looking at an honest-to-Yoba wizard.

And he had the same thing running through his icy breath. The walls of his world disintegrated into glassy pieces.

Potential. He could be worth something. He could be worth Kutone, with this gift only he could use.

Rasmodius’s grin, almost sinister, seemed to agree with Sebastian’s thoughts. “The efforts to restore magic to Stardew Valley began with Kutone’s grandfather. And now, thanks to Kutone’s own contract and work with the Junimos, magic begins to flourish anew. The first to awaken to his natural ability—you, boy, are that child."

“It makes sense, might I add, that a child of Void would forge a new something out of the nothingness of his aspect. Your friends might hopefully follow suit, if you follow my tutelage.”

Kutone squeezed his hand tighter. “No,” she hissed. Taking his hand into both of hers, she directed Sebastian to look into her dark eyes. “What he’s proposing to you,” she slowly started, “is too goddamn dangerous for you to consider doing, for any reason whatsoever.”

“Kutone—"

“You’re excited—I know you’re excited, Sebastian, I can feel it, okay? You want it so badly, but you have to understand!” She let go of his hand and pressed both of her hands against his face. Pressed her forehead against his. Her warm whisper kissed his icy breath, and the overflow of his choking emotion solidified his resolve, despite what she said next. “You already have what you need, without having powers or anything! I told you, didn’t I?—you have to be you. Everything you have and don’t have. Only you.”

“I might have what I need,” Sebastian replied, “but I don’t have what I want.”

She jolted back. “What could you possibly want that you’d risk something that nearly killed me?”

Her question stirred a storm of interlinked thoughts in Sebastian’s head. The cold room of his boyhood. His mother crying over the kitchen table. The echoing clumps of footsteps heading to the door. The deep, final click of the door closing. The distant bellow of a departing train. Running his lungs and legs ragged to catch up. Counting days, weeks, months, years. Places to belong, things to do to make him belong. Drifting.

Drifting.

Then finally finding his place, in her deep, dark eyes, in her sadness, in the soft contours and curves of her body, in that sweet mellow voice that both broke and built him. In her kiss, in her embrace, in
her scent, in her smile, in her worry now.

And wanting to anchor her, and everything about her, as close to himself as he possibly could. To
never let go again. He had to be strong enough to never let go. Again.

“A lot of things,” Sebastian said instead. “And I think I’m willing to gamble on this one.”

“You begged me not to worry you, you hypocrite!”

The anger in her voice pierced him like a venomous barb, but that too, he wanted to keep. “Then
please, Kutone. Help me.”

“Help you?!” she spluttered. “Why didn’t you ask me before?! Before you went into those mines!
Before all three of you got hurt, and before all of this awakening shit?!! Why didn’t you ask me
anything, Sebastian?!”

“I wanted to do something on my own!” he shot back. “Something within my own power,
something I could do and be proud of!”

“That doesn’t mean you have to do it without help!”

“I didn’t want to rely on you all the damn time!” He pressed a hand against his face and rubbed
down. “But now I’m asking you. I’ve done what I could, and now I know I can’t go on without you.
Please, Kutone.”

She sighed, exasperated, but the needle-sharp edge melted out of her voice.

Rasmodius folded his hands into the wide sleeves of his robe. “It seems we’ve reached an
agreement?”

Sebastian gave Kutone a moment’s chance to rebel one more time, but from the defeated shake of
her head, she’d give no fight. He owed her another debt, but whatever came out of this, he swore to
do more than just repay her.

The wizard gave a wry smile, and unfolded his arms. A flick of his wrist, and two gems sparkled,
floating, over his palm. “Then..." One a gift given, the other a gift to give. “Let us begin.”
“I’m freezing.”

A boy lies in bed. He wears an oversized sweatshirt, which is why he feels winter gnawing through his skin and deep into his marrow. Even underneath a quilt and comforter, with a space heater next to him and the window closed, he shivers and shivers enough that the tear streaks against his cheeks have frozen into trails of frost.

“I can close the cracks for you.”

Another boy appears, with a woven cloak of dried grass over his shoulders, skin and feathery hair completely snow-white. Ice crystals bloom like a fairy ring around him, as he leans over the boy in bed. He repeats his words:

“I can close them, if you want.”

The boy in bed shivers harder, teeth chattering. “Dad can fix the cracks too.”

A cloud of frost rolls out as the snow child lands on the floor with an indignant rustle of his cloak. “What if he’s not coming back?”

“He’s coming back. He has to come back.”

Kutone, gasping, sat bolt upright from a blanket of snow. No blizzard, thankfully, but the gulps of air she sucked in bit back with an unforgiving iciness. As quickly as she breathed in, she coughed it right out, as she staggered to her feet. After a few bumbles and a wary stumble in knee-deep snow, she finally steadied herself.

Sheets of white as far as her eye could see. She remembered Rasmodius telling her to expect a different Void-scape than her own, but she hadn’t imagined Sebastian’s to be so... ethereal. At least, in comparison to the murkiness of her own Void.

*From nothingness we beget existence.* The wizard, of course, had no desire to elaborate.

He did, however, finish the rest of his explanation. “As you stand,” he’d directed to Sebastian, “you are in no physical or non-physical condition to undertake the trial. As such,” And here he turned an amiable grin to Kutone, “we will send in an envoy.”

A misstep sent her face-first into the snow. She would never, she decided, ever do this shit again. Not even for Sebastian’s sake, once this was over.

Spitting and scrabbling back to her feet, she tried gauging her whereabouts. Where was forward? Where was backward? What, exactly, was she doing here again?

“Find the source of his power. But let me clarify.” Here, the wizard had pressed a beautifully cut prism of Star Shards into Kutone’s palm, much to Sebastian’s visible chagrin. Then, after handing the Frozen Tear to Sebastián, Rasmodius waved his hand. A shaft of light danced between the two
gems, as Rasmodius harrumphed his approval. “The link has been established. As the envoy, you are looking for a someone, Kutone. Someone who’s bestowed the boy with the very powers he cannot control. Once you find that someone, we shall decide how to proceed.”

Sebastian’s shoulders had slumped again. “I have a choice?”

“If you decide to make this power your own.”

But that first depended on Kutone finding said source. Heaving a deep, exasperated, and orienting breath, she began trudging through the snow again. Something, she decided, would happen so long as she kept moving, despite the lack of landmarks. No hills, and no dips. The flat, unending plane of tundra stretched far into the foggy gray horizon. Skeletal trees, bare boughs showing no signs of past snow, dotted the plains but presented no guidance.

*I guess,* thought Kutone, drawing her arms around herself, *I do have auroras, at least.*

They were the only curtains of color streaking through the gray. Undulating, prismatic lines that sort of *broke the sky,* if Kutone had to describe them. But unlike the soothing awe a true borealis struck into the heart of its viewer, these auroras unnerved Kutone like the tingling tension of an imminent lightning storm. Probably the shape, she decided, jagged and chaotic and downright unpredictable.

That same shape, however, compelled her to follow the lines.

She’d asked Rasmodius for a more concrete image of her target, and received a grunt in denial. “If I could venture inside myself and verify, I would,” said the wizard. “The boy is not so readily open as you were, my friend.”

Uncertain, unpredictable, un-fucking-reliable, and so, completely unsurprising. In a fit, Kutone kicked away a clod of snow. Proper gear would have been nice. A better briefing, surely? At least a weapon—that lava katana she’d recently purchased from Marlon would have done wonders here.

“You’re not supposed to be here.”

She looked down from the auroras, to find a boy standing before her. A boy? With nearly translucent skin and brilliant white hair, he glared up at Kutone with glassy crystal eyes. From the cloak of dry grass over his shoulders, to the fact he stood, unsinking, on the surface of the snow, the boy was more fairy than human.

He clenched his hands into shaking fists. “You’re not,” he said again, “supposed to be here.”

“Seems I missed that memo,” Kutone replied. She sank to her knees, half-burying herself in snow to match the boy’s eye-level. “Would you like to bring me up to speed?”

Icy crystals fell away from his hair like fairy dust, as he shook his head. “Get out. He doesn’t want you to see here!”

“‘He’ meaning Sebastian?”

“I’m keeping my promise! He’s the one that broke his!”

“Listen,” said Kutone, squeezing every ounce of patience she could muster, “Sebastian’s in trouble. I’m here to help him.”

“You can’t,” the boy spat. “Because he broke himself!”
In a blast of cold wind and a slurry of snow, the boy disappeared. Ice whipped and flayed at Kutone’s skin, tore through her hair, and she could do nothing but curl into a ball against the cutting blizzard. Numbness needled her fingertips and toes, and crept higher up her body, collapsing piece by piece under the blizzard’s barrage. Blackness curtained the auroras, the gray sky, the white plains, in rings. Ice froze her eyes shut, but that, for a terrifying yet believable second, was alright.

Snow made a wonderful cushion.

“He didn’t abandon me. He just went away."

The little boy in his oversized sweatshirt curls himself tighter into the black fabric. He breathes in the smell of motor oil and Dad’s sweat from the seams. Mom put it in the wash before, but Dad’s smell never leaves the threads of his favorite sweatshirt. It’s proof, the boy decides, that Dad will come home.

He hasn’t left his room in days. He hasn’t opened his curtains or window, either. It’s spring, but outside is too cold, and Mom’s eyes are puffy every morning.

He recounts the days. Nine. Just one more day, maybe, and Dad will come home.

His new friend, sitting in an ever-growing ring of ice, cocks his head to one side. “Are you still thinking? About my help?”

The boy nods into his pillow, his black hair grinding against his cheek. “I just have to wait for Dad.”

“It’s really cold in here though.”

“I’m used to it now.” If he closes his eyes tight and thinks about the cold, this new friend of his visits him in his dreams. In those dreams, the black sky’s cracked and snow falls. Drifting. But still his friend sits in that icy circle, and stares with those shiny gray eyes. They look a lot like Dad’s. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Your friend.”

“Before that.”

“A fairy.”

“No. I’ve read stories. You’re different.”

The snow child cocks his head to the other side. Considers his answer. “Okay then,” he says. “I’m a monster.”

Blackness faded in favor of brilliance, as a wintry brightness pierced through and coaxed Kutone’s eyes open. She laid on her stomach, hands in semi-closed fists.

Her waking thoughts buzzed into coherent statements. First, this dream she had, and the one before it, were not dreams. Visions? Not quite that, either.

“Memories,” she whispered. She glanced up from the ground, hard and cold yet dirt nonetheless, to the cloudy gray above. “Sebby, are these your memories?”
Numbness still ballooning her joints and touch, she scraped herself up from the ground and into a sitting position, knees tucked underneath. The auroras still snaked overhead like cracked glass, but their colors swam in a pattern different than before—she’d been blown to a different location.

Snow rose like dunes behind her, but ahead, the permafrosted ground gave way to loamy soil. And in the center of the smallest patch of soil, shone the only shaft of light Kutone had seen cast upon the ground in this snowy realm. With a preparatory breath, she levered herself to her feet, and approached the sunlit ground.

A seedling sprouted from the earth. Twin leaves open wide to soak in the sun, it glowed like a beacon. Awed Kutone kneeled low, and reached out to touch the leaves, when a voice—her own voice?—interrupted. “It makes sense he couldn’t hurt you,” she said. “I guess it was more of a warning than his actually trying to cast you out. Perhaps he wants you to stay, but just won’t admit it.”

Kutone shot to her feet, turning to face what she thought would be herself again. But no. This woman resembled fire more than darkness, in her rich auburn locks and crimson silks. A gossamer veil hid half of her face, but her golden eyes smiled down on the sprout at Kutone’s feet. “The seed of light,” the woman mused. “The key to healing him, and yet, it doesn’t have the proper water to grow.” Bells tinkled on her wrists and ankles as she joined Kutone’s side. “It is not yet time.”

Could this help her in some way? “Is it a special kind of water it needs? Maybe I can find it and help this little thing grow.”

The woman brushed her fingertip along the edges of one of the twin leaves, and sadly shook her head. “It is an incredibly special kind of water, but I’m afraid it’s something Sebastian will have to find himself. You’ve already done your part for his sake.”

Kutone frowned. “Hardly.”

“More than you think, actually.” She pulled down her veil, revealing a face that mirrored Kutone’s too well, despite her gold eyes and brown hair. “You sowed this seed within him, Kutone. You’ve given him a gift beyond anything he could have asked for.”

“And he’s apparently repaid me by stacking my features onto a different woman’s? Don’t get me wrong,” she quickly added at the woman’s amused laugh, “he’s got taste, that’s for certain.”

She pressed her hand to her chest. “You compliment yourself, then. Would you believe me if I said this is how he sees you?”

“No, of course not. I know I can catch a few eyes, but I’m not that pretty.”

“That’s a shame then.” The woman stood up again, and faced Kutone. “If only you could truly feel what you do to him, I’m sure you would have believed me. Yet, that’s not my job either. That would be his.”

“He,” Kutone pressed, “is also falling apart. What can you tell me?”

“He reached out for something he promised he wouldn’t.” The dancer gazed up at the auroras. Despite their shine, concern darkened her features. “And that destroyed their pact.”

Their pact. I’m keeping my promise! He’s the one that broke his! “You mean with that little ice fairy.”

“Fairy?” With a troubled frown, the woman crossed her arms. “I suppose that’s one way of calling
him. You’ve always held a neutral sort of perspective regarding differences like this.”

“Mostly because it doesn’t matter to me. What matters, is that my boyfriend’s about to freeze to death because of something about that kid. I have to find him.”

“That, I’m afraid, is easier said than done.” She pointed past the shaft of light descending on the seedling, to the prismatic cracks in the sky. “Cracks come from a point of impact. I imagine you find the source of this breakage, you’ll find the fairy as well.”

Nodding her head in thanks, Kutone cast one more glance upon the sprout basking in its sliver of sunlight. A seed of light she’d somehow sown. If only it could be the heart of a burgeoning forest. Or maybe, the sprout itself could become a great tree, and provide a haven to everyone crossing the tundra. She hoped Sebastian would find that special water soon.

Climbing the slopes of the clearing’s wintry bowl, Kutone drew her arms around herself again. Who knew one sprout provided so much warmth to such a wide area? She considered running back, to warm herself at its aura, but she found herself hooked on both the woman’s and the fairy’s words: Sebastian had broken some kind of promise.

“So the fairy’s angry at that, and won’t get this ice thing under control?” It sounded like a viable theory. “Should I kick some sense into him then?”

No one answered her, but she didn’t take it as permission. What to do with the kid was apparently up to Sebastian, after all. How would he even know when Kutone caught up to him?

And if those dreams—memories—were anything to go by… No wonder Sebastian’s Void took the form of a stagnant winter. Silent, save for the crunch and sift of snow shifting under Kutone’s soaked shoes. Like the world itself waited for something to make it move again. Something—someone—to bring back a sense of time. No doubt, the “point of impact” of the sky’s cracks started at the moment Sebastian’s father had left, wherever or whenever that was in this dimension. And that winter fairy didn’t want Kutone to find that moment.

_Thirty-seven days…_

The whisper came on a breath of wind, from the direction of the auroras ahead. Sebastian’s voice, Kutone realized, from his childhood.

_Eighty-three days…_

Counting days instead of weeks and months, as though gleefully waiting for a record to break.

_One hundred and forty-six days…_

Though it was unlikely he was still counting like this, Kutone’s chest seized. Wrenched itself into a sympathetic knot.

_Three hundred and ninety-three days…_

She stopped on her path, her dragging steps through the snow choked by her own tears. “Sebby,” she murmured, “your dad left you.”

_No he didn’t.

At first taken aback by the response, Kutone settled her nerves, and tried again. “I know he must have had a reason. It doesn’t change the facts. He abandoned you and your mother.”
No he didn’t!

“Sebastian—!”

Liar! Dad’s coming back, just you wait!

She started trudging along again. “Let’s meet,” she said. “We’ll talk about this.”

I don’t want to see you! You’re just going to lie again!

“Your dad left you a pretty motorcycle, didn’t he?”

He showed me how to take care of it. I have to keep it nice until he gets back!

At a certain point in his waking life, Kutone guessed, Sebastian must have realized the truth. Dad wasn’t coming back. Yet another part of him had latched on to hope. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe Dad would come home. Maybe things could go back to what they were before. It was a method, she knew, of keeping himself alive, because without hope, what could he look forward to? What could he mend himself with? What could keep him afloat?

If only she could offer herself…

Who are you, anyway?

A child locked inside of perpetual winter only knew so much, after all. Either that, or Sebastian’s distance from himself kept this part of him ill-informed. She stopped again, breathing hard against the effort of her trek. “Kutone,” she responded. “Out there, you grew up. We met. We’re together.”

I heard your name. From out there. You’re not—you’re not gonna leave me, are you?

“I mean to stay with you as long as I possibly can, Sebastian.”

Really?! The silence stretching after that buzzed with anticipation, until he spoke again. Um! We have to be for sure! You should come find me!

A wind stirred, as Kutone wondered what made up Sebastian’s “we.” Her answer manifested in a swell of snow and ice, as the winter fairy appeared again, crystal eyes sparking with relentless fury. “I won’t let you,” he hissed. “I won’t let you! Get out!”

The shredding blizzard hurled Kutone into the air again. Before she could scream, another burst punched her in the stomach. Shock knocked her back into the black again.

Consternation knitted Rasmodius’s brow. The awakening ritual proceeded smoothly. Or at least, from the rune circle above Kutone’s and Sebastian’s heads, the circle floating between the palms, and their respective jewels, floating, casting their ethereal glows in glimmering winks against their faces, the ritual proceeded well enough. Both were natural adepts at magic, Sebastian moreso than Kutone. The boy followed instruction without question, and made the process more natural than most adepts learning magic. He held his palms up as instructed, as though in offer to Kutone’s hands, palms down as though receiving. Ice crystals still blew from his lips in puffs of cold air, but he no longer appeared troubled by the development. Rather unfortunately, from the twitches of his hands, something agitated him enough he was liable to withdraw the position, and throw Kutone out of his heart.
And Kutone! What was going on in there that she had shallow cuts nicking her arms and face, even cutting sprigs of her hair? Her fingertips and her knuckles had gone bright red from frostbite, and her breath rolled out in labored, beleaguered puffs, yet she maintained the position, eyes closed and brow creased in determination. Kutone would undoubtedly finish this job, but hopefully, Rasmodius prayed, at a reparable price.

Ice crept along the wall next to the two on Sebastian’s bed. Crystals bloomed around them in a ring. Perhaps, Rasmodius decided, it was still too early for the valley to see magic again. Whatever gave Sebastian the same icy abilities as his father, it needed sealing, before it was too late, like that same father before he disappeared. He saved the rest of his conclusion, however, for the results of this experiment.

With a wave of his hand, Rasmodius summoned his tome, as well as the materials necessary for the seal. An ore of Void Essence, as well as obsidian and fire opal. Then, in one wide turn, he reached for the earring in Sebastian’s left ear. At least the boy made this part of making the seal easy.

“Mom read me a story. You’re the yeti boy who cried frozen tears.”

Crystalline flowers bloom from the icy growths around the snow child. He flicks off the petals of one that looks like a wildflower. “You didn’t believe me when I said I was a monster.”

The boy sits on the side edge of his bed, and watches the yeti boy. “You look more like a fairy than a monster.”

The yeti looks up from his creative destruction. His crystal eyes glitter like the ice dusting his white hair. “My friend said the same thing.”

“Before the lake.”

“You shouldn’t talk about what you don’t know.”

“You’re all alone too, huh?”

“You have your mama. I have nobody.”

The boy lifts the hood of his father’s sweatshirt over his head. His vision half-obscured, he doesn’t see the intrigue the yeti casts him. “Mom says she’s not waiting for Dad anymore. Says she’s already seeing someone.”

“Are you lonely?”

The boy nods, and presses the cuffs of his bunched sleeves against his wet eyes. “She won’t wait for him with me. I’m all alone.” Sobs shudder his tiny frame. “Did Dad not want me? Why did he leave?”

“Humans leave all the time.” The yeti pulls his hand back from the icy flowers. “That’s why, they’re no good. They hurt others, first by staying, and then leaving.”

“Does that mean no one wants me?”

In a rustle of his cloak, the yeti leaps to his feet and over his ring of ice, to the boy sobbing into his father’s sweatshirt. “We’re the same,” says the yeti. “So I promise, I won’t leave you.”
The boy peels his wet, gray eyes from his sleeves. He sniffles back the rest of his tears. “You’re a liar. Just like Mom. And Dad.”

“I can prove it.” The yeti points up to the broken sky. “I can close those, remember? With ice. I can do it for you. I can keep them closed.”

“And you won’t—you won’t leave?”

“Yeah. But you have to promise, that you won’t leave me too.”

She was above the gray clouds. The sharp auroras shined brighter, in a woven yet shattered web, against the black sky, a sky, she realized, she found familiar. While everything else in her world had been an amalgamation of her nightmares, the sky, she remembered, had been a lovely view. She could stare and stare into a point in that sky, and while the present stars flickered out, new stars glimmered into their places. She could watch the night shift and curve and slide for the rest of time, if time weren’t a constraint.

Time. The same constraint that had trapped Sebastian into his characteristic melancholy. Too much time had passed between abandonment and someone telling him, “I won’t leave you.” If only, Kutone thought, pressing her fingertips against the tears falling from the corners of her eyes, if only her mother had stayed in the valley. If only Kutone herself had been born here, raised here, and known Sebastian early enough she could have saved him from himself.

“Kutone? Are you here?”

She flipped over and staggered to her feet. “Tell me where you are,” she croaked. “Sebby, please, I have to see you.”

“Don’t cry. I’m here. See?”

“Here,” was a little boy’s room. Darkened as it was, a static glow surrounded the room’s fixtures like fuzzy blue lightbulbs. Under her feet laid a dark rug, bordered with stone castle patterns and depicting a dueling pair of dragons. One blew ice, the other, fire. Open books and tossed-aside dust jackets laid scattered on the floor, a desk, on top of a small bookcase, and a nightstand. Player pieces and scenario cards for an abandoned board game lay splayed by the foot of a bed.

A bed, with dark sheets and comforter, upon which sat a pale little boy in an oversized black hoodie. His black hair parted at the middle, unlike his older counterpart, Sebastian’s amiable smile held a startling radiance. Maybe the glow-in-the-dark wall stars pasted in a cluster behind him gave him that effect. Or maybe, it was the moonlight cascading down through the window above the headboard of his bed. Or the auroras, still blinking their prismatic sheen on the ceiling directly above Sebastian’s head.

A shiver shot up Kutone’s legs, her spine, up to the roots of her hair. She hugged herself again, as she sat down on the rug. “Aren’t you cold, Sebby?”

“It’s always like this. But I’m okay.” Sebastian lifted his arms, showing off the sweatshirt and its drooping sleeves. “See? It’s Dad’s, but he gave it to me.”

The same damn hoodie Sebastian always wore, but this one wasn’t nearly as worn. He’d treasured it since his childhood. “Your dad,” started Kutone, “he’s not coming back, is he?”

The smile disappeared from Sebastian’s round cheeks. He dropped his arms, and stared straight at the
floor. After a hard blink, he nodded once.

“So you made a promise with the yeti.”

Another nod.

“And now you’re falling apart.” She waited for an affirmative, but received none. Maybe he needed an easier explanation. “Everything’s freezing out there, Sebby. More like, you—you’re freezing everything.”

Alarm jerked the boy’s attention up. “Did I hurt you? Mom?”

“No, no, Robin’s okay—I’m okay.” Thank goodness for the semi-darkness. Sebastian likely couldn’t see the itchy redness flaring across her hands and arms. “Do you know what happened?”

Sebastian’s gaze dropped back to the floor. “I think it’s you.”

“Rude,” Kutone snapped. “You do realize I’m here to help you?”

“I—!” Sebastian knitted his hands together, at least as much as his sleeves allowed. “I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry.”

His forlorn expression stabbed regret deep into a spot just between her heart, and her ribcage. Kutone cursed herself, with a heaving sigh. Who could have known—other than Robin, of course—that Sebastian had been so innocent, so honest, in his childhood?

“Kutone, you’re not leaving me, are you? Because I said something bad? I’m sorry—!”

“Sebby,” she cut in, her voice as gentle as her personal irritation allowed, “I promised I wouldn’t, for as long as I can.”

The fear in his gray eyes softened to tenderness again. He smiled. “Right. You don’t lie. I know.”

She made a mental note to verify this pure smile with Robin, as she brought her knees close to her chest. “Tell me what you mean, though. I happened?”

“I want to be with you. And I want you to stay with me.”

He reached out for something he promised he wouldn’t.

You have to promise, that you won’t leave me too.

Ah. So that’s what pissed off the yeti boy. More like, she had pissed off the yeti boy. Or maybe, this expectant, hopeful look Sebastian cast her was what did it. He saw her, and no one, and nothing else. Not even the fact loneliness became his constant companion on the day he realized he’d been left behind. This winter, this perpetual loneliness of his that had become so part of Sebastian—it was loathe to leave him. Hated having someone else take its place to smoothe over the gaps left behind by hurt. Hated seeing Sebastian trying to invest himself in something beyond his own solitude.

And that was probably why, the moment Kutone met Sebastian’s gaze with her own, a wintry tornado stirred between them. Separated them. Threw Kutone into the wall furthest away from the boy in his oversized sweatshirt. Icy spears stabbed into the spaces dangerously close to her head, pinning her in place despite Sebastian’s protesting shouts.

“You’re not,” the yeti boy drawled, “supposed to be here!”
“How am I supposed to help that?” Kutone shot back. “Your winter hurricane threw me in here.”

“It wasn’t me! I didn’t bring you here!” The yeti whirled around to Sebastian. “You led her here! She was supposed to leave and you brought her here! Without telling me!”

Sebastian shrunk into his sweatshirt. “I thought, maybe, she could help. She says she promised me. Outside. And she promised here too—!”

“You can’t trust her!” His gasping shriek betrayed his barely-contained sobs. “She’ll go away—someone will go away. It happens all the time. No one wants to stay…”

Maybe it was tongue-tied agreement that made Sebastian shrink even further into his sweatshirt. But, though muffled by the fabric, he mumbled out his response. “But she’s still here.”

With a start, the yeti spun around. Disbelief hardened into a snarling scowl. Glittering tears beaded at the corners of his icy eyes, even as he launched himself at Kutone.

She stared, mouth open, at not only the dilated eyes, but also the serrated teeth, the protruding claws, and the ice encasing the yeti’s outstretched limbs. This, she thought, was the concrete face of wrath. Much like her own snake, he lashed out to protect himself. And to him, Kutone was a viable cancer, waiting to unleash the worst pain Sebastian could imagine. Heartbreak? She’d already dabbled in that with him. Now how far would she push it?

It was a valid fear. She closed her eyes. The hisses drew closer. Icy breath blew into her face.

Then it yelped. Choked. A body slammed onto the floor.

Kutone opened her eyes.

There, flailing on the floor, laid the yeti. His monstrous features dissolved back into his fairy-like semblance, he rolled and tugged against the grip on his cloak, pulled taut and choking him.

Sebastian held the hem of the cloak in his little hands, and yanked hard against the yeti’s struggling. He breathed hard against the strain. “I trust her,” he simply said, and tugged another direction against his captive. “You can’t hurt her.”

“Why?!” the boy screeched. “Why are you choosing her and not me? I was your friend this whole time! I fixed the sky for you and I closed the cracks so you couldn’t feel the cold! I did all of that for you! I’m your friend!”

Sebastian’s grasp trembled. “I don’t know.”

“What makes a human better than me?!”

“I don’t know! But it’s not—it’s not that she’s better.” Teary as he was, revelation softened Sebastian’s stricken features. “It’s not that anything’s better. Can’t I have both?”

The yeti boy quit his raging tantrum, and turned a boggled stare up to Sebastian. “Both?”

“Kutone wouldn’t lie to us, you know. She could be your friend too.”

The crystalline, wide-eyed stare turned to Kutone next. Analyzing. Calculating. Remembering another time, Kutone guessed, from the droplets of frozen tears landing on the hardwood floor in soft clicks. She sat unmoving against the wall, figuring a sudden move would spook the thoughts churning in the fairy’s head.
Then came his answer. Slowly, cheek grinding into the floor, he shook his head. The frozen tears tapped harder. “No,” he mumbled between dry sniffles. “No, she can’t. She’ll leave. I know it, she’ll leave!”

On her hands and knees, Kutone crawled forward. “Hey,” she crooned. Once closer to to the yeti boy, cloak still taut in Sebastian’s hands, she lifted one hand and reached out to pat his snowy hair. “Hey. Look. Shh.” Despite the pinpricks of cold against her palm, the boy’s hair was soft like plump feather down. “You’re part of him, aren’t you? Haven’t you heard anything I’ve said to Sebastian?”

“I did. I did hear.” His voice trembled, barely containing the bawl about to erupt from his lungs. “But you both say it’s not certain. You might leave. He might leave. And I’ll be all alone again. Again!”

Still sniffling, the yeti boy levered himself to his knees. He swallowed down the rest of his sobs. “That’s why—that’s why I can’t trust you. You have to leave! You have to let me stay!”

With a final yank, he pulled himself out of Sebastian’s grasp. Mumbling a weak “Please…” the boy drew his hand back, and mightily swung forward.

The burst of pressure that hit her might as well have been a stalagmite punching her in the chest. Kutone slammed into the wall and blasted through. Above her, the prismatic web of cracks rushed away with her breath, as well as her consciousness.

Result: the experiment was a spectacular failure.

It looked promising at first. Kutone had found the source of Sebastian’s abilities—she’d indicated as much when she pressed her hands down onto Sebastian’s, and gripped hard enough she left red prints on Sebastian’s pale wrists. The rub, however, began with Sebastian himself. He struggled back. Tried to wrest his hands away from Kutone’s, tried again and again to throw her out, but she held fast.

Then for one moment, serenity returned to Sebastian’s troubled features. A smile had even flickered. He returned Kutone’s grip with apology, with fondness, with what Rasmodius would even categorize as love. The placidity in Sebastian’s expression had warmed even the wizard for just one moment—and then it completely shattered.

He’d wrenched his hands away, and the broken connection threw Kutone head-first over the bed’s headboard. A pained groan rushed out of her, but she laid, unmoving and crumpled, on the floor. The sigil on the ceiling burned away, the spell broken as both Star Shard and Frozen Tear landed in the fabric of the bed.

Sebastian, meanwhile, was completely conscious. Shoulders heaving with his labored breath, he pressed his palm against his sweating forehead. “Shit,” he mumbled. “Shit, shit, shit—that was all real? God, she saw all of that?” He glanced down at himself. “Shit!” Ripping his sweatshirt off, he hurled it across his room, barely missing Rasmodius.

And the ice still made a circle around him. Cold air still blew out of him in visible puffs. Rasmodius shook his head. “You had it under control for a moment.”

“‘Under control’?” Sebastian snapped. “Keep kidding yourself.”

“I hardly have time for levity, boy. You’d do me a great service by telling me what happened inside.”
Incredulity glowered in Sebastian’s icy eyes. He snorted and shook his head. “No. I’m keeping that to myself, if you don’t mind.” Then, with a start, he blinked at the empty space before him. “Kutone?”

“Your rejection knocked her out cold.”

“And you didn’t think of telling me that first?!” Just as Sebastian sprang to his feet, however, he slammed back into bed from Rasmodius’s raised and open palm. “Move.”

The wizard shoved him back down again, this time pressing his hand down on Sebastian’s chest. Ice crystals crept up the wizard’s fingers as Sebastian glared death. “I recommend,” Rasmodius hissed, “that you think twice before addressing me with such threat, boy. I am here to make sure you don’t kill the girl. Understand?”

“Kill her?!”

“Understand?”

Sebastian eyed the ice creeping up Rasmodius’s sleeve, and finally relaxed.

“Very good.” Dispelling the ice with a sweep of his affected arm, Rasmodius then reached into the wide sleeve of his robe. “It’s unfortunate this ended in failure, but in retrospect, it was an outcome to be expected. I admit I lost my rationality in my hope to see magic returned to the valley.” He produced a small black hoop earring, and dropped it into Sebastian’s palm. “Let this be a symbol of my apology.”

A confused Sebastian felt at his lobe. Nothing. “When did you take this off of me?”

“At the first signs of your possible rejection. I suggest you put it on. Now.”

With practiced ease, Sebastian hooked his earring back into place. The effect was instantaneous. A violent shudder vibrated once through him, and the cold finally lifted. He blinked, dumbfounded, and breathed into his palm. No frost. He touched the wall. No ice.

Rasmodius took a final check, seizing Sebastian by the collar of his shirt and turning his face up. “As expected. Back to normal.” He let go, and breathed a thin sigh in relief. “I’ve added some augmentations to your accessory. A seal of fire, if you will, to keep your abilities in check.”

Tension drained from Sebastian’s shoulders. He slumped against the wall. “So I have to wear it all the time.”

“At least until we can make another attempt, should that be something you wish to do.”

For a lengthy second, Sebastian said nothing. Not even appearing to contemplate a response, he slid off his bed and crept to Kutone’s side. Gingerly touched her cheek. “When we do, I want to do it on my own.”

“A fair notion.”

Leaning against his bed, Sebastian levered the prone Kutone into his grasp. Pressed his face against hers and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “She’s cold,” he murmured, tightening his embrace. “Hold on, Kutone…”

The wizard watched as Sebastian dragged his quilt off his bed, and wound Kutone in its layers. Watched, as Sebastian, apologizing under his breath, drew himself around her again. Reflected, on
the contentment that arose in him, the same warmth Rasmodius sensed from that flicker of serenity in Sebastian’s features before. Listened, to Kutone’s easy breath against Sebastian’s anxious tremble. “I believe,” said Rasmodius, drawing his arms into the sleeves of his robe, “I must apologize again.”

Sebastian’s glare prompted the wizard to continue. “I called this venture a failure. I take it back.”

“Why should you?” Worry reduced Sebastian’s voice to a defeated mutter. “I thought I could do something, could be strong for her sake, and here I am again, messing it all up.”

“Not quite.” Rasmodius turned away, drawing a transport sigil at his feet. “You ejected her from the deepest trenches of your heart, yes. But perhaps, you also had a glimpse of a great, infinite possibility, while you allowed her inside.

“That, I believe, can be called a success, small as it is.”

“Are you trying to make me feel even worse?”

The lavender runes glowed in anticipation, as Rasmodius chuckled. “Believe what you like. It is not my position to sway you one way or another. However.” The wizard turned back around, and tipped the brim of his hat toward the pair. “It is in my jurisdiction to tell you, do rest up. Both of you. I will return to check on your seal once you are well.”

“As if I ever want to see your face again.”

“A fair answer. I appreciate the honesty.”

Light flashed, and the wizard disappeared.

Sebastian held tighter, planting a long kiss against Kutone’s forehead. Exhaustion finally finished its work, and with Kutone nestled perfectly against him, he fell asleep.

His dreams this time, remained quiet, like the image in them, of a snow-white fairy boy staring up at a gray sky.

Powder snow drifted to rest around him, and piled on the shoulders of his dry-grass cloak.

Chapter End Notes

This was an unexpected, yet fun chapter for me. Difficult, like Kutone's version of similar events, and equally eye-opening for me.

Guys, thank you always for your support. Your hits, kudos, comments, and bookmarks all do such magic to keep me going on this fic. Please keep feeding me your love for this fic. Or your hatred, I don't mind. I'm not eating that mess though, it messes up my stomach something awful.

You can ask me questions, forward me prompts, or ask my characters questions over at my tumblr. Anon is turned on!
dance with me in that misty rain

Chapter Notes

Fair warning. **Dancing is a deliberate double entendre.**

Also, I'm so sorry this is late! I don't like making excuses, but I got drafted in to work so my writing schedule for the day got pushed back a good seven hours!

You can yell at me for my tardiness over at my [tumblr](https://tumblr.com) though. The inbox is still open.

On the chirping morning of her second Flower Dance, Kutone stood on the steps of her veranda, and watched the sky, clouding over in direct betrayal of the weather forecasting sunshine. Emily’s custom dress fit her perfectly, the fabric like whispering clouds against her skin. True to the seamstress’s word, Kutone even had arm gloves covering her arms up to just below her shoulders, and her outfit’s delicate silver embroidery sparkled under the spring sunlight. Haley had even insisted on finalizing Kutone’s look, and stopping by on her way to the venue, fashioned the ends of Kutone’s violet hair into loose, bouncing waves. She even fitted a handmade crown of purple, indigo, and yellow flowers on Kutone’s head.

She was the picture of a damn storybook princess, and she loved every moment of this realization. Coupled with the jitters of asking Sebastian to dance with her, Kutone practically bounced down the steps. She spun once, watching her dress rise and settle with the movement.

“I dreamed about this last year,” she murmured, toeing the ground with her flats. Happiness really was an attainable thing.

With a final preparatory breath, she began the journey toward the venue for what Lewis called the “newly improved” Flower Dance. Thanks to a “gracious and anonymous” donation, Pelican Town was able to update the end-of-spring tradition to better suit the changing times. Some facets of old tradition still supposedly remained, like the dance Haley had coached to Kutone, and the crowning of the Flower Queen. Everyone in town now had a suit or dress for the occasion, in spring-themed pastel colors for females, and matching darker colors for males. Bachelors and bachelorettes wore special corsages to denote their availability.

Regarding this, Sebastian had managed a cackle. “Sam’s going to **love** parading his singleness.”

Of course they talked about Sebastian’s icy situation, once both had woken up and showered away their caked-on grimy stress. At least, Sebastian filled Kutone in on the results of her venture. Though disheartened by her failure to rein in the debacle, Kutone could agree with Rasmodius’s assessment: it wasn’t an utter and complete failure. She’d found the root of Sebastian’s icy aspect. She’d tried to reconcile with it. And Sebastian was willing to try again, some time in the future. Hopefully, he added, when he had a better understanding of his own complicated nature.

He’d cast her a worried grimace next. “I saw everything as it happened,” he said. “So I know what you saw and heard.”

“About your father,” Kutone replied, gently rolling Sebastian’s new earring between her thumb and index finger, “when were you planning to tell me?”
“Never, if possible. Why would I tell you I was unwanted?”

“So I could tell you, that if that’s true, your dad’s full of shit.” She had pressed her lips and nose into the crook of Sebastian’s neck, and after breathing in his fresh scent, continued, “You were a really cute kid, you know.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“Then here’s your pragmatic answer; there’s no telling what your dad was thinking when he left. Trying to conclude his motives based on the hurt he left behind—you’re doing nothing but destroying yourself.”

Sebastian held an uneasy expression, like he wanted to agree, but wariness held him back.

“It’s not something you have to resolve right away,” Kutone had added. “You can take your time.”

After contemplating in silence, he’d thanked her, apologized, and promised he’d try again. But the issue, Kutone knew, still weighed on him despite his easy recovery over the few weeks leading up to the Flower Dance. While he fielded Abigail’s and Sam’s concerns well enough, remembering the debacle alone was enough to get Sebastian down into an unnerved quiet. Robin and Maru, overjoyed at Sebastian’s recovery, had the same effect, and Demetrius? Sebastian had adopted a new type of awkward coldness with him, a distance that struggled to inch the gap closed with every interaction. “Because none of it was Demetrius’s fault,” Sebastian had explained to Kutone. “His doting on Maru never helped, but, maybe I was just being difficult.”

She’d resolved to support him through his new revelations, and thanks to this, Kutone found herself more and more on the receiving end of Sebastian’s affection. It wasn’t so much that he used her as an emotional crutch. Neither was it blind dependence. The way he held her, the way he looked at her, and even sometimes, the way he said her name—they all resonated with a newfound stability in Sebastian’s conviction. He sought her knowing he would find her.

Which was probably why Sebastian was the first to notice Kutone, when she entered the western clearing. From the way Sam had to shake him back into reality, Haley had done her job well.

In their quest to match partner outfits, Emily and Haley had opted for a deep wine color for Sebastian’s suit. Under the unbuttoned jacket, they’d outfitted him with a gray pinstripe vest, over a deep gray dress shirt. He’d even somehow agreed to let someone—Haley? Maru?—style his hair, that the usual fringe framing the right side of his face seemed to bounce with a subtle, yet volumized curl.

A hot flush flared up Kutone’s neck, to the tips of her ears and across her face. Only Sebastian could make her blush like this. Flustered beyond anything she’d ever experienced, how was she going to ask him to dance with her? Biting her lip to keep her jaw from dropping, she tried a small wave.

He lifted his hand in return, the motion finally getting Sam, dressed to the nines himself in a deep blue suit, to realize what had his best friend star-struck. “…in a dress!” Sam’s exclamation carried over the buzz of the gathering community. “You never told me… in a dress?!”

Sebastian denied the question with a shake of his head. Pushing a hand into one of his pockets, he fought off Sam’s spirited slaps, and started making his way through the crowd, toward Kutone.

At least until Emily and Haley, in sky-blue and pastel yellow sundresses respectively, seized Kutone and dragged her deeper into the clearing. “Flower Queen is still my title,” said Haley, “but I think we made a strong contender for the crown here!”
Emily stepped back, marveling Kutone. “You’re truly so lovely today, Kutone!”

“It’s thanks to you two,” Kutone replied, glancing back over her shoulder. Sebastian had changed course, but still negotiated his way toward her. “Really. You guys worked so hard on this.”

“And now we have a town full of absolute dolls,” replied Haley. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

Someone rested their hand on Kutone’s shoulder, snickering his response. “No one ever even asked you in the first place, Haley. Don’t go putting people’s words in their mouths.”

The momentary leap of Kutone’s heart crashed back down, upon seeing the dark green sleeve of Alex’s jacket. While Haley argued back, Kutone turned to search the crowd again.

…There. By the banquet tables. Maru and Robin had stopped Sebastian to take their turns doting on him. Sebastian’s attention, however, meandered to Kutone whatever chance he had.

She could catch up to him.

She’d barely stepped away from Alex, Emily, and Haley, when Alex seized her by her arm. An easy grin graced Alex’s features. “Calling dibs on third dance,” he announced, “since you’re giving the first two to him, right?”

“You look like you want to grab those first two as well,” Kutone replied, “just to make him mad.”

“Would if I could,” Alex cackled. “But I’m not that dirty of a fighter, so, I’d be okay with giving him at least the second dance.”

“As if I’d go along with that. Let me make sure no one nabs him before I do.”

Alex released Kutone’s arm, calling to her as she set off, “Who else would do that? His mom?”

“You never know,” said Kutone, pivoting on the ball of her foot. “Sam might want to make me mad!”

She turned away from Alex’s laughter, and meeting Sebastian’s eye again, she stepped lightly toward him. Were the townspeople always so suffocating for the annual Flower Dance? Kutone remembered Robin saying the occasion was more for the younger bachelors and bachelorettes, but the springtime daze seemed to have made all the town’s age groups giddy. Chattering from one direction, giggling from another. Admonishment in one corner, and sighs in another. Pam pressed a flute of fizzy punch into Kutone’s hand, and Gus presented a crystalline rosehip and strawberry jelly for sampling. Harvey could barely stammer out a greeting as she passed, while Elliott bowed a grandiose flourish far too formal for the occasion.

Then, in the middle of a farewell pivot, she bumped into Abigail. Not at all fazed by the collision, Abigail, grinning, examined Kutone’s outfit from head to toe. Eyes on Kutone’s bare collar, she pouted. “I was about to get a little miffed that he still hasn’t given it to you,” she said, “especially after Alex and I busted ass to help him, but seeing you, I think I get it.”

“Who hasn’t given me what?”

“The only ‘he’ that would want to give you gifts, duh.” Laughing at Kutone’s confusion, Abigail linked arms with her. “But that’s on him! We should dance, Kutone!”

“You’ll be waiting in line.”
“Geez. Life of the party, aren’t you?”

She wished she weren’t. And she wished Demetrius hadn’t grabbed Sebastian next, primping and straightening his collars and pockets and especially the corsage pinned into his breast pocket. Judging from Sebastian’s strained expression, Demetrius had even managed to weave in a pep talk of sorts, the content of which made Sebastian alternately pale and flush.

Abigail, following Kutone’s line of sight, blew a raspberry. “Who would’ve thought Sebastian could be a looker, huh?”

Kutone sighed at herself, and pressed a hand against her face. “Haley and Emily really outdid themselves,” she replied. “Has anyone asked him yet?”

“Maru, of course,” said Abigail, lifting one finger. “Since they’ve started getting along so well.” She lifted another. “Penny, because of Sam, I bet.” Then a third and fourth. “Leah’s apparently asked too, and of course Sam, because he lives for nothing else but to humiliate Seb. Oh, and,” Here, with a mischievous smirk, she lifted a fifth finger. “The rumor mill says Haley’s stepped up too.”

“Surprising,” said Kutone, voice shaky, “considering the Flower Queen only took Alex’s hand last year.”

“And the year before that. And the year before that.” Abigail shrugged. “It’s probably the new costumes. New look, new partners? Fresh starts? Open horizons?”

Apparently, five new, fresh, and open horizons.

Not, of course, Kutone thought, if she stole him away. Sipping on her drink and allowing the fizz to bubble over her lip, she filed a slowly developing plan into an accessible corner of her thoughts. Meditated on the chilly weight in her chest. “I’m jealous,” she murmured, earning another knowing simper from Abigail. “Never thought myself so petty, and yet at the same time, I know I’m arrogant.”

Abigail raised a brow. “How’s that?”

She downed the rest of her drink. Blinking back the rush of boozy fizz, she set her flute back on the tabletop. She wiped aside a droplet of punch with her thumb, and tossed the curled waves of her hair over her shoulder. “Look at me. Does Sebastian have any reason to say no?”

“Negative,” replied Abigail, giggling.

“So if he does do something stupid like that, I’m moving out of here.”

A gentle touch trailed up her shoulder, and caught a lock of her hair. “You move out,” said Sebastian, “and you take me with you, right?”

While Kutone cast a calculating side-eye, Abigail snickered. “Just don’t say no, Seb, and you’re good.”

“Don’t say no?” Some kind of inside joke?

“A statement of fact,” Kutone corrected, turning to Sebastian. Her gusto, however, faded before Sebastian’s amused smile. “Hi, by the way.”


Her exit brought about a surreal type of silence—an eye of the storm type of silence where the dull
roar of camaraderie continued around them, and yet, the space between them remained warm and thick with both expected talk and inevitable wordlessness. The sort of quiet that teased a kiss at the end, but Sebastian, unwilling to end this moment, wouldn’t go for it. Yet. His caress at her temple slid her hair back behind her ear, and followed the ridge of her ear down, down the edge of her lobe, the corner of her jawline, the nape of her neck. It had to be on purpose, to get that shudder out of her.

That plan developing in Kutone’s head took another step closer to actuality. Now to keep an eagle eye out for the perfect moment to slip away.

Sebastian, undoubtedly oblivious to Kutone’s thoughts, smiled. “You look incredible.”

“I’d say the same for you,” Kutone replied. “Your usual getup’s cute, but would you consider wearing suits more often? For my sake?”

“Look, I—I adore you, Kutone. Believe me.” Cupping her fingertips in his palm, he pressed his lips against her knuckles. “Just not enough to wear this all the time.”

She snatched her hand away, pouting as a cover for the second hot flush flaring up her features. “So that’s how shallow your affection runs. I see.”

“Kutone.”

“Then compensate.” With a victorious smirk, she leaned in to Sebastian, just enough to prompt him to lay his hands on her waist. “Dance with me.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

The clouds overhead cast deeper shadows as morning wore into early afternoon. Even as the dewy scent of rain melded with the floral tones of the venue’s decorative flowers, the airs of the Flower Dance capered on. Pastel sundresses bloomed and settled like drifting spring petals, while their dark-suited counterparts played their steady roles of leaf and stem.

Kutone’s first dance was nothing short of magical. Literally, for the hidden Junimos in the boughs above bouncing with the music. And figuratively, because until the moment she stepped into the first beat of the dance, participating in this event with Sebastian—who infamously hated the Flower Dance to the Void and back—never struck Kutone as a possible reality. Not a single ounce of his begrudging attitude dulled the confidence of his lead. In fact, lively enthusiasm glowed in his features, enough that, at a lull in which they came close enough to share a breath, a whisper, a heartbeat, he pressed his forehead against hers, and smiled. Of course, he fought to keep a semblance of his usual stoicism, but in that single moment, his collected demeanor crumbled, totally, in favor of a radiant, effortless, and heart-stoppingly beautiful smile.

At the wave of emotion washing up her chest and tumbling back down, Kutone was surprised her knees didn’t buckle. Even moreso at the single, crystal-clear thought that struck through her:

I want him.

His every touch after that jolted her, as though ice still frosted his fingertips. Every press of his hands against her, and she wanted nothing more than to bury herself in his touch, his breath, his voice, his all and everything.

The dance’s final flourish swelled, and dwindled. Rested, as a misty breeze accompanied the last twist of her body. Her back against Sebastian’s chest, she brought her arms down in unison with the
rest of the dancers, to a rousing applause. She let the thrumming of her heart continue, and even let it rise again, as Sebastian placed his palms against her waist, and murmured into her ear. “I’m actually enjoying it this year.”

*Make him mine.*

She spun around to face him. “I am too.”

An announcement reached them in their breathless moment: *feel free to prepare for the second round; we have to make sure we don’t need to move to the saloon…*

Because of oncoming rain. Kutone’s voice jumped ahead of her thoughts. “Unwind with me?” she said. “Maybe we can beat the rain?”

“The woods,” replied Sebastian, almost too readily. “There’s an old trail. Enough trees that even if it did start raining, it wouldn’t ruin your dress. Your outfit. Or anything. I mean…”

Trees and rain meant no one would see. She wove her fingers between his.

“Take me there.”

The rain came as a gentle curtain of mist, as they slipped away from the festivities and meandered along the woods’ obscure trail. Sebastian led the way, holding Kutone’s hand as she lifted the hem of her dress in her steps along the forested floor. Again, and again, they looked back over their shoulders and held their breaths to listen out for anyone on their trail.

Yet, at a point deep in the woods that the mist veiled the air in downy flecks of gray, Sebastian apparently had enough. Tightening his grip on her hand, he yanked her close, and with a shuddering breath, kissed her. Hard.

She loved the suddenness. Loved his breathlessness as he dragged his hands down her back, her waist, her hips, his rough caress trying so hard to press her deep against him. Loved that he’d learned, showed she’d taught him well, in his nibble and pull on her lip, in his suckling kisses against her neck, down her neck, to the crook of and against her collarbone. As she breathed in a musk of rain, hair product, and sweat from his hair, he sighed against her skin. “*God*…”

He slid his lips, his breath, back up her neck, and pulled away just before he breathed into her ear. Teasing? She trailed her fingertips through his hair, against his cheek, coaxing him to come back and taste her again.

And he almost fell for it, leaning in once to tug a kiss on her upper lip. “Wait.” Grasping Kutone’s hand, he kissed her fingertips again, while reaching into his pocket. “Here. For you.”

He let go for one moment, to reach around behind her neck.

She seized the chance, craning her head up and planting a long kiss on his bottom lip.

Whatever Sebastian was fiddling with, he finished immediately, allowing a weight to fall against Kutone’s chest, as he returned her invitation. But he pulled back again, allowing Kutone to look down at the pinkish prism hanging from a metallic mount and silken cord around her neck.

She touched the crystal of her new necklace. “Is this…?”

It’s beautiful… would have been her answer. I love it… because she truly did. Yet these words died on her tongue, as Kutone looked up from the Star Shard necklace, to Sebastian’s eager gray eyes—alive and present and waiting for her.

She seized him by the lapels of his jacket. Drew him down. Left a light kiss as a show of her gratitude. Another, harder, as Sebastian wound his arms around her waist.

Then she brushed the tip of her tongue along his lip. Breathed in with the tingle between her legs, and out with Sebastian licking a kiss on the corner of her mouth. His hand trailed past her hip and around her thigh, as he pushed her back against the rough bark of a nearby tree. Her hiss at the pain melted into a pleasured sigh, both from his searching kiss, and his own hardening anticipation pressing into her inner thigh.

“You…” He ground against her. “You should have been Queen.” Already pulling up one side of her dress, he laid another hard kiss on her lips. “It should have been you, Kutone.”

He was hot on top of her. Icy hot, from the suckling kisses he trailed back down her neck, to his fingertips caressing up her thigh. She breathed deep, mouth half-open as Sebastian’s touch grazed over her, then back again, sliding up to a growing wet spot.

She was already shaking. So much for her experience. Or maybe, she’d taught him too well in the time since Winter Star. He circled his fingers against her, pressing hard, then softening his pressure in each arc. She could barely restrain a squeak, as she gripped his wrist and ground into his touch, every motion wetting her further. God, she wanted him! Even without her guidance, the way he spread and closed her, rubbed her back and forth in lines and circles with that slow, deliberate pressure—she could scream for him, she wanted more. He’d wrested control from her, had her nearly crying already, and he was nowhere close to being in her. And what would that be like? How well would Sebastian fill her? How deeply could he love he—?! “—Ah!”

He’d slipped his touch under the cloth of her panties, and rested his fingertips just inside her softened folds. And he stared, face flushed bright red, incredulous at the reaction he was getting. He pushed his fingers in, just enough for Kutone to moan again, his name a faint gasp on her voice. She watched him through hooded eyes, as he lifted his other hand to one of the straps of her dress. He eased it down, and pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder at the same time he pushed his fingers deeper inside.

She tried reasoning with her body. Over a year had passed, after all, since the last time she had someone in her like this. But then he pulled out, and pushed back in. Again. And again. In and out, as he kissed down her chest, and drew down the bodice of her dress—and Kutone knew, as the collected mist in Sebastian’s hair trickled onto her skin, as she gasped between each rock of her hips, “I need you.”

He watched her for a moment with his mist-freckled features, and soon enough, cracked that natural, shining smile. “How much?” he pressed, pulling his fingers out.

She shuddered at the hollowness setting in again—she was truly starving for him—but without hesitation, undid the topmost buttons of his dress shirt. Dove in, and sucked a hard kiss against his collar, while frantically un hitching his belt and rolling down his zipper. Reached inside—forget the teasing—and tugged a stroke up with both hands. He pulsed hard and hot as she reached inside again, cupping him with one hand and stroking him with the other. She earned a low groan, and another deep kiss. “Do me,” she hissed.
He shoved her against the tree once more, as she pulled him out of his pants. His hand on her side slid down, guiding her exposed leg up and around his hip. Forehead on hers, he let her guide him, until he stopped, touching her entrance. They shared a breath, Kutone already arching back, the limp waves of her hair plastering to her skin.

Sebastian trembled with her. “You’re sure—we can do this?”

Kutone curled her arms up around his neck, and laid a kiss on his lips. “Even if I scream,” she replied, “don’t stop.”

He nodded, and with a hitch in his breath, slid inside. They jerked against each other, Sebastian groaning, Kutone whimpering.

*Oh god…*

She bit into the fabric of Sebastian’s jacket, muffling her cry as he drew out, and without waiting, slid in again. And again.

*Oh… god…!*

Again, his breath already ragged against her ear. Each thrust drove deeper than the last, his voice a lower, pent-up vibration against the nape of her neck. Was it the position? Was it Sebastian himself? He reached a point buried so far within her, that Kutone’s cries became a mix of helpless whines, from when he pulled back, and laughing euphoria, when he hit that spot once more. Again, and again, she alternated between this high and low, that her voice climbed higher with desperation, that she clenched his jacket in trembling fistfuls, that she tightened her leg around him and bucked with him, attempting to pull him in even deeper.

She could barely say his name. Could barely speak, as Sebastian bit her ear. He stopped a moment, buried deep in her. Whispered something (*I need more…*), reassuring her (*You’re so warm and soft, Kutone, I need you so bad…*), and pulled her down. Laid her on the ground, hair spaying out behind her, flower crown tumbling away as he pinned her wrists down. He slid into her again, his rhythm faster (*I can’t stop…!*), harder than before (*Fuck, I can’t stop…!*). She wrapped her legs around him, squeezed her knees against him, her quick breath matching the pace of his thrusts (*I can’t hold it back, Kutone…!*), and she felt so alive, so present, so goddamn *in love* (*I-I’m… I can’t…!* with the man over her—

That was it.

The realization hit her like Sebastian’s final jerk and choked cry. It tingled and pulsed and flared all through her nerves, like the unconscious rock of her hips against him, and the wave rushing up her spine to the roots of her hair, and back down in an icy flush. She felt Sebastian pouring into her, at the same time he planted a long, probing kiss on her lips. His breath still short, still heated, sweat and mist rolled down his face, and yet he smiled.

She returned a fond smile of her own, as she loosened her legs around him.

*I love you…* would have been her remark, but with Sebastian pressing his lips over hers again, it hardly seemed the proper moment. Another time, she promised, suckling his lip. Another time, when her breath wasn’t catching, when she could look at him the same way he watched her then—straight on, honestly, lovingly.

She repeated the words in her head anyway, *I love you*, as she brushed her fingers through Sebastian’s damp hair.
With all and everything that is mine.

I love you.
It took some seriously careful negotiation, but as the static faded between them, and the mist hardened into a pattering drizzle, they somehow pulled themselves back together. For Kutone, it was a matter of dropping her dress back down and, unfortunately, smearing dirt over her dress. For a shaky, dazzled Sebastian, zipping himself back up required more thoughtful concentration he ever needed in his life. Even so, after making themselves somewhat presentable, they meandered back through the forest, around and as far from the festival as possible, on their way to the Banks. Sebastian draped his jacket over Kutone’s shoulders, and pressed his palm into the small of her back as he matched her sneaking pace.

That inevitable wordlessness wedged its way between them again. Kutone, no stranger to afterglow and adept at quiet reflection, focused instead on Sebastian. The flush of his features gradually died down, yet nervousness needed the air around him. He scanned the distance between the trees, obviously praying for no contact with his friends, family, or fellow townspeople.

Kutone pulled the jacket tighter, the motion squeezing out a puff of Sebastian’s scent. “If someone caught us now,” she said, “what would you do?”

He stopped, struck by the question. A few seconds’ thought later, he responded, leveling an uncertain gaze toward Kutone. “I don’t know. Run?”

She buried her lips and nose into the collar, desire rolling in retaliation to her doubt. “Running because you’re ashamed of what happened?”

“No. Not at all.” Color crept back into Sebastian’s features again. “More like, what happened—that was supposed to be between us. If anyone else saw, I don’t want to know about it.”

She nodded, though she didn’t fully understand. At least, her logic couldn’t pick it apart, but her body apparently understood. Something about having that physicality, about realizing their most visceral and vulnerable connections—it nullified the necessity of understanding words. Sex did that to intimate relationships. Sebastian could speak to her with his touch and the pace and temperature of his breath, and Kutone’s body could translate and understand.

Her thoughts backpedaled. It seemed wrong, she thought, licking rain from her lips, to call it sex. “I wouldn’t have minded.” As they strolled along, she felt Sebastian’s incredulous stare on her. “If someone saw us. I wouldn’t have minded.”

“I—I’m assuming that’s your experience talking.”

“No. Not this time.” She breathed in his scent again, and nudged her body close to his. Relaxing into Sebastian’s arm around her shoulders, as well as the press of his cheek against her forehead, she went on. “I can’t speak from experience about this. This is a first for me.”

“I don’t get it.”

“There’s a corny way of saying it. To talk about us, back there alone and so… together.”

“Making love?” The second the words left his mouth, Sebastian clapped his free hand over his face, rosy to an embarrassing degree.
Kutone snickered. “Told you it’s corny.”

“But you really think that’s what happened?”

“Don’t you?”

They stopped again, staring at each other. Kutone held a placidly confident simper, while acceptance and assurance dawned in Sebasian’s features. “I couldn’t stop,” he mumbled, drawing his hand away from his face. “Seeing you, in that dress with your hair down, and hearing you—hearing us—it felt right.”

“I thought so too.” She stole a kiss then. “You see? This is new to me.”

“What about—?”

“Nope. Not even him. Or anyone else I’ve been with, for that matter.”

The trail opened out to the lower flats of Cindersap Forest, hazy with drizzle. The sounds of festivities long dead behind them, Kutone, spotting the red roof of Marnie’s ranch in the distance, gathered her bearings, and beckoned a reluctant Sebastian to follow. “Something else on your mind?”

“I realize,” Sebastian stammered, taking hold of Kutone’s hand, “I’m realizing, now—just now, I swear—shit, how could I forget this?”

He couldn’t lift his eyes to hers, and the moisture between their hands wasn’t just rain. Cold sweat, thought Kutone, from panic and consternation. “Hey,” she said, squeezing his hand. “Don’t beat yourself up. Talk to me.”

“Well…” Gathering his nerves in a re-orienting breath, he managed an apprehensive glance. “You were prepared, for what happened back there? I wasn’t. Honestly. I tried—I really, seriously thought I could stop, but now I know that was just irresponsible—!”

“Think it through.” She stroked his skin with her thumb. “You’re the only one panicking here, and I’m not asking you to stop by Harvey’s for emergency pills, right?”

“That’s assuming you’d tell me you need them.”

“I would, if I did.” She stifled a laugh at Sebastian’s lost look. “Breathe, Sebastian. IUD. Considering the life I lived, I needed something more reliable than the pill.”

Relief restored the calm to Sebastian’s features. “And that,” he sighed, “is your experience talking.”

“See? I knew you were a smart guy.” She laughed, the motion dripping rain down her face. “Now that that’s established, you left some spare clothes at my place, right?”

Sebastian jumped at the shift in topic. “Yeah,” he replied, “thank god.” He tugged on his sodden shirt and vest, stuck to his skin. “You’ll let me stay tonight?”

“So long as you know what that means from here on out.”

“From here on…?”

Mischievous Kutone nodded, and pressed herself against him again, fingers sliding down and around his crotch. “First a hot shower,” she whispered, “together.”
Ecstasy wrung a low groan from him. She watched his entire face and ears redden again, as the image she injected did its work with Sebastian’s fantasy. “Then, since we’re skipping the festival, you owe me a second dance. Your choice, between bedroom and living room.”

He halted her from drawing away, his voice a velvety husk against Kutone’s ear. “Bedroom. Lights off. Door locked. No matter who comes to find us, we’re not stopping.”

“I can’t wait.”

The last rains of spring receded with the night, and the next morning opened with the prickling anticipation of dawning summer. While the heat outside still needed a week or two to reach summertime peaks, inside Kutone’s house, especially between a tangle of sheets, blankets, tossed pillows, and each other, summer might as well have arrived already. Yet it wasn’t Sebastian’s sleeping breath through her hair, or his legs intertwined with hers, or even the pressure of his skin sticking to hers, that baked Kutone awake.

Rather, it was the sound of knocking at her front door, and Oki’s barks that awoke her to the anticipation of summer. Groaning, she rolled into Sebastian, in the hopes that her back toward the door, as well as Sebastian’s steady breath, would somehow make real life go away. Why choose putting clothes on and participating in society, over the cozy embrace of the one person she truly treasured? She decided to address outside matters later.

But the knocks, polite and patient, sounded again. Oki barked louder.

The moment ended, as Sebastian shifted against her. His voice, dry and croaking, brushed against her skin. “Not getting that?”

“Now that you’re awake,” Kutone sighed, “I guess I have to.”

They remained still for a few long-enough moments that Sebastian’s breath settled back into restfulness. His ambient pulse, in breath and heartbeat, along with the warmth of his body, lulled Kutone’s eyes shut as well. Maybe, she thought, drawing circles along Sebastian’s chest, this was one of those moments that could go on for a little longer…

No, no, no, came the knocks, still polite but more urgent.

Come! Come! Come! Came Oki’s barks, each yip more excited than the last.

She blew out a grudging sigh, and rolled out of her favorite moment. Already she missed that tangle around her, as she pulled on fresh underwear, loose lounge pants, and a clean shirt. Sebastian was barely stirring awake again, as Kutone, buttoning up her top and tucking in her pendant, sauntered into the living room and, after a long yawn, opened her front door.

Mayor Lewis, relief relaxing the creases at the corners of his eyes, beamed at her. “We missed you after the first round yesterday!” he said. “I’m assuming you came home sick?”

Kutone leaned her shoulder upon the doorpane, and allowed Oki to nudge his way out as she chuckled. “Hardly,” she replied. “Some personal arrangements came up.”

“Nothing dire, I hope?”

She raised a brow, and crossed her arms over her chest. “Like I said—personal arrangements. You’d know what I mean, right, Mayor ‘I-urgently-need-a-bottle-of-truffle-oil?’”
Lewis squared his shoulders and harrumphed loudly. “Then I suppose I won’t ask if you know where Sebastian disappeared to yesterday. That explains why Robin seemed so dismissive, while Demetrius…”

…Probably had an inkling and was preparing to raid her house. “Wise assumption. May I ask, then, if it’s another urgent bottle of oil that drove you to wake me up this morning?”

“You certainly inherited your grandfather’s devilish tongue,” Lewis replied. “But no. It’s good news, actually, rather than an embarrassing request.” Fishing his pocket for a notebook, Lewis flipped through the pages until he landed on the notes of his search. “Here—yes—I received a call from the Stardew Valley Tribune,” he began. “Premier local magazine, you see. Articles and photospreads about the valley’s local arts, culture, attractions, fare—somewhat tourist-oriented, I suppose.”

“They want to do a feature on the town?”

“A feature on this very estate!”

Kutone blinked. A magazine wanted to do an article on the Banks? Just a dream, she assured herself. The farm was still in the middle of recovering from its decade-long abandonment, and had nothing particularly of value to a tourist magazine. “You mean your mansion? It’s got its historic value.”

“Well, certainly—it’s the very mansion elected officials of Pelican Town reside at for the lengths of their terms. I have lived their 20 years, and it still feels so—ahem.” Lewis wagged his finger at Kutone. “Your misdirection won’t steer me off-topic, miss. The Tribune is looking for ‘up-and-coming’ estates that both restore and preserve the culture of the valley.”

“I wouldn’t call this place ‘up-and-coming,’” Kutone mumbled. “More like I’m protecting my family’s assets.”

Chortling, Lewis ripped out the page in his notebook, and handed it to a reluctant Kutone. “Tell the editors that—they’ll certainly write it into the article for you.”

She stared at the contact number listed across three lines in blocky numbers. Contact these jokesters herself? “Lewis,” Kutone sighed, “you wouldn’t want to do me the favor of declining this for me, would you?”

The mayor stroked the curled end of his mustache, and after a nod, tugged on the brim of his cap. “Hear me out, Kutone,” said Lewis. “You might think you have little to offer. You look out across this land, and you only count up the features it lacks.”

Kutone shrugged. “Truth hurts. I have a ruined greenhouse I still need to look at, crop spaces to allocate, crab pots to craft and set, a silo or two to situate—oh—and I still have to look into constructing a cellar—!”

Lewis held up his hand for silence. “That’s exactly my point, miss. You don’t see what your efforts so far have done for us. The goods I ship out on your behalf are garnering attention. People hear that the lovely seasonal fare comes from a little farm in Pelican Town—and now they have to know more. Since when did that humble seaside village have a farm? And how could that farm produce such fresh river fish, such vibrant fruits and vegetables, such deliciously simple artisan crafts? And then they find out one woman—one single woman who moved out here on a whim—is behind the phenomenon!”

His beaming smile cracked across his features again. “I, as mayor, am proud of this lucky star that landed in our sleepy village. I want you to see all the good you contribute to our community, all the
awakenings and fresh starts people across this town have had since meeting you. And that, my friend...” He nodded to the slip of paper in Kutone’s hand. “That is how I hope you’ll see the results of your work.”

As well as gain tourist interest in the area, was Kutone’s assumption, but Lewis’s gentle expression stopped her from voicing her pragmatism. Either the man was an incredible sweet talker, or he was truly sincere. Kutone opted for the latter, and in her defeat, sighed. “Meaning you want me to seriously consider doing this interview.”

Lewis laid a firm pat on Kutone’s shoulder. “Please do.” He turned and descended the steps, where he turned back around. “Give my regards to Sebastian, then. I’ll let Demetrius know he’s safe with you.”

Safe with Kutone, was probably the last thing Demetrius wanted to hear about his step-son’s whereabouts, especially after his disappearance during a social event meant for matchmaking. Not that, Kutone assumed, the sentiment would deter Sebastian from staying longer.

Sebastian, who, as Kutone found upon closing her front door and looking up from the note in her hand, leaned against the bedroom doorframe. Despite his bleary expression and bedhead-kinked hair, he’d apparently woken up enough to pull on a fresh shirt and pants. “He’s right, you know,” he said, padding across the room to Kutone. “You’ve done a lot in a year.”

She brushed past him, and tossed the note onto a nearby side table as she sauntered toward the kitchen. “Doesn’t mean I want or need the acknowledgment. Lewis just wants the publicity.”

He opened the living room curtains on his way to follow Kutone, allowing bright splashes of growing morning light to cascade through the window. Shielding his eyes against the light, Sebastian swiped up the note, and while Kutone went through her fridge, settled back against the kitchen counter. “It’d be good for your publicity too. You get more eyes, more interest on your goods, you’ll be making some serious money.”

Eggs and milk in hand, Kutone nudged the fridge closed with her foot. “Pretty comfortable where I’m at, thank you,” she said, pulling down a mixing bowl, as well as a frying pan. “I never asked to be famous.”

“Sure, but, we live in a world that loves rewarding your type of hard work. If nothing else, you’re a good story for them.”

She paused in the middle of sifting flour, baking powder, sugar, and salt into the bowl. “Are you sincerely trying to get me to do this?”

Sebastian shrugged. “You can probably find a phone at Joja before you put them out of business.”

“I’m off the grid for a reason, Sebastian.” She pointed at the fridge. “Grab the stick of butter in there and melt me three tablespoons worth.”

“You’re trying too hard distract me right now,” Sebastian replied, acquiescing, “which tells me you aren’t totally against the idea.”

“Who says I have to try?”

“Don’t, Kutone. I don’t know everything that’s going through your head, but I know you better.”

Kutone scoffed. “Just because you were amazing in bed last night…”
“This isn’t some false, temporary confidence that’s coming up just because we slept together,” Sebastian replied. “Like I said, I know you better. You want to do good on Lewis’s word. You see the practicality of taking the interview, especially for the town’s benefit, but you’re running from something.”

*Dammit.* She let the sifter rest over the mixing bowl, and pressed her hands on the countertop. *Yoba above, how did he get to be this good?*

“So tell me,” Sebastian pressed, mellowing the sharpness of his voice, “why you—a damn good, experienced businesswoman, a former executive assistant who handled interviews with major papers and magazines from all over the country—are getting so antsy about one local interview, that you asked the mayor to reject it for you.”

“What the hell do you know about how good I was way back when?” Kutone grumbled.

“I don’t.” He dragged over a coffee pot, and set about preparing two mugs of coffee. “I’m only assuming. So either answer the question and correct me, or I’ll keep assuming.”

For now, she decided, she’d let him carry on speculating. She had pancakes to cook, and thoughts to equally brown at the same time. Much as she wanted to lash out, after all, neither did she want to spoil their good feelings carrying over from the night before. It must be from comfort, Kutone thought, that drove Sebastian to press her on the issue. For his concern, he deserved at least her civility, and definitely her cooperation.

In between nudging up the edges of her pancakes, she cast a wary glance to a locked sidetable by the TV. No one had asked or even bothered to wonder about that little drawer that wouldn’t open, likely because it served so well as an aesthetic, especially with the basketed arrangement of horseshoe geraniums and white bindweeds sitting on top. Their meanings, which had Caroline and Evelyn casting doubtful, concerned looks when Kutone requested the arrangement, in association with the mobile phone locked inside the drawer, was a shameful kind of dig at herself. Her own cleverness made her huff a dry laugh.

If she wanted to contact the Tribune, Kutone had to open up that drawer. Had to pick up her phone again and turn it on for the first time in a year and a half. Who knew if the damn thing still retained its charge.

She flipped a pancake over in the sizzling pan, and accepted the hot mug of coffee Sebastian offered her. Its aroma—rich, smoky, chocolatey—relaxed the knots in her shoulders into a long sigh. “Did you need milk or sugar?”

Sebastian had sauntered out of the kitchen, and retreated once into the bedroom to pick up his pack of cigarettes. Pocketing the pack along with his lighter, he set his hand on the front doorknob. “Black wakes me up,” he replied, and turned the knob. His voice was barely audible over breakfast preparations. “I’ll be outside.”

“Sure.”

The door closed behind him, but the porch echoed his steps as he descended the first couple and sat down.

She flipped the finished pancake, crisp edges steaming, onto a plate, while her thoughts wandered back to the phone in the locked drawer. All she had to do was take it out. Turn it on. Dial the number Lewis left her, and tell the people at the Tribune she would politely decline their interview. Easy.
She ladled another dollop of batter into the pan, still sizzling and gleaming with butter. Two would probably be enough between her and Sebastian, since he never seemed to have the appetite for breakfast. Strange he would be the same on this particular morning, considering the night before.

Flip.

Or maybe, she had killed his appetite, with her refusal to put herself back on the grid. Because that’s what made her own insides lurch in anxiety—making that call meant people could find her again. They could test her number, see if it still rang. Leaving it off for a year and half meant she probably had a full inbox of voice messages, but no one would hear the automated message noting a disconnected phone number. That was Mom’s and Dad’s decision—we’ll keep you with the basics, just in case you need to make an emergency call to us.

Another pancake done, this one a little blacker than the first. Butter burned after a short while. Nothing that maple syrup couldn’t hide.

Kutone switched off the burner. Breathed in smoky butter from the kitchen air, and leaned back against her counter. She sipped her coffee again.

Sebastian seriously made a damn good coffee, so good that Kutone could drink it black without her stomach curdling in rejection.

And, he made a damn good boyfriend, too. Careful and deliberate in his limited words and layered actions. Neither pressing or pulling back when Kutone yanked up her walls. That’s why, she figured, he waited outside.

The least she could do, she decided, especially after the pleasure and comfort he afforded her, was to answer his question. And feed him too. After drizzling maple syrup over their breakfast, she trudged over to the sidetable in the living room. Lifted the flower arrangement and pulled off the key taped to the bottom.

Then with a readying breath, she unlocked the drawer.

The glossy black screen of her phone reflected back her uncertain grimace, as she pulled it out and thumbed its power button. Half-expecting, half-hoping it needed a recharge, she pressed and held, until, to her dismay, the screen flickered white. A happy buzz vibrated in her hand as its welcoming message flashed across, before finally settling on the image on her lock screen: a picture of the cloudy night sky from the rooftop of her old apartment building. The real stars were dull and barely visible, while the city lights gleamed and sparkled like pinpricks of twinkling stars.

Her phone barely had any juice left, but it would hold long enough she couldn’t delay the inevitable. Sighing again, she tucked her phone into her palm, picked up their plate of breakfast, as well as a couple forks, and her coffee.

A light kick at the corner of the door had Sebastian opening up, and helping her outside. They sat down together on the same step, coffee mugs at their feet while Kutone offered up breakfast. “From scratch,” she said. “Pretty good stuff.”

“Probably an understatement,” Sebastian replied, snuffing out his cigarette in a tin can. “I’ll only eat your breakfast, you know.”

Sniffling a chuckle, Kutone waited until Sebastian took his first satisfying bites, before cutting in herself. “No need to butter me up,” she said, and whipped out her phone for Sebastian to see. “You’re getting your answer.”
“You had a phone this entire time?”

“Without the net, GPS, or other such advanced functions it had before.” She let Sebastian take her phone. “Just swipe to unlock.”

Sebastian stared, fork still in his mouth. “You’re sure you’re okay with me looking at this?”

Kutone shrugged in response. “After yesterday, I don’t have much else to hide from you. Just know that… whatever’s in that thing is from before I moved out here.”

“Like a time capsule.” Half-forgetting breakfast, he swiped across, deftly tapping icons on the screen to navigate. “Never took you to be a photo type.”

“A good 89% of those photos were taken by someone else.” Kutone set down the plate between them, and sipped again on her coffee. She watched the sun climb higher up the horizon, already summer-bright despite the tail end of spring still leaving. Dew flavored the air humid, a rainy scent just underneath the buttery smell of pancakes and maple. The sky, she thought, opened so much wider during this interim between seasons. And that same sky would close up, constrict around her throat, if people realized she was out here in the valley. She closed her eyes and breathed in the morning air. “Sebby,” she started, “I don’t want people to find me.”

The taps stopped, Sebastian’s gaze on her, as she went on. “You were right, see. I’m running. From people? My own past?” She picked at the pancakes, flaking off pieces of their crispy edges and kneading them with her fork. “Maybe not. I like to think I’ve come to terms with my old self, but that doesn’t mean the people from that past think the same way. And I don’t have the heart to face them, if they find me because of this magazine.”

“Rhei’s already found you.”

“So I’m grateful he’s been able to keep his mouth shut. Not that that was ever a problem with him.”

Oki’s barks echoed in the distance, while Sebastian looked down at the phone screen again. “You’re sure about that?”

Kutone rolled her eyes. “Fine, Rhei being Rhei is the only reason why we were ever found out.”

“I’m sure that was part of it, but…” Sebastian flashed the screen to Kutone. “Looks like he stole your phone pretty often.”

*Did he?* she almost responded, until the answer winked back at her from her phone screen. Since when was this photo in her gallery? While she turned her back to the camera, Rhei—grinning like a gremlin—had snuck in a selfie. Multiple selfies, as Sebastian’s swiping indicated, until suited Kutone in the pictures turned around and lunged for the phone.

Admiration laced Sebastian’s chuckle. “You sure made that blazer look good.” He squinted at the screen, as he zoomed in on Kutone. “You look tired though.”

No need to be a researcher like Demetrius, or an engineer like Maru, to figure that out just from looking at those old photos. Kutone stuffed pancake into her mouth, as she shrugged her response. While she felt no need to hide from Sebastian’s discovery, his close scrutiny of her pixelated features—with or without Rhei, in or out of work attire—made her internally squirm. She watched the top corner of her screen, hoping the damn phone would run out of juice at this perfectly opportune moment.

But the opportunity passed, especially when Sebastian’s perusal of her phone’s contents stopped on a
paused video. The first frame showed Rhei in front of the massive window of his old office, sunlight shining onto the easy, content simper of his features. From the angle, Kutone could tell, he was likely leaning back against his desk. It was strange to see him frozen for that one second, unaware of everything that would build up and fall apart after this moment—

Oh, no, not this video. Loaded fork in her mouth, she reached out, intending to snatch back her phone before Sebastian could press play.

“You said you had nothing to hide,” said Sebastian, leaning away from Kutone’s grasp. He tapped the screen, allowing Rhei to unfreeze and speak.

Alright, first rule of working with me—you don’t leave your phone on your new desk, if you don’t want me stealing it like this.

Despite the graininess of his voice through the phone’s speakers, Rhei’s sunniness shone like the sunlight on his face. Kutone, huffing, retreated, as Sebastian relaxed. He rested the phone on his lap, as he shook out another cigarette from his pack, and with a long breath, lit up.

But seriously, Kutone, congrats on your promotion. What you did—it’s not easy. You’ll probably think I had a hand in getting you up here, but all I did was say “I want that one as my assistant.” That’s it.

A thin plume of smoke lifted into the air. Watching it curl and dissipate into the blue sky muddied Kutone’s own thoughts, thoughts that turned and rolled uncomfortably like a stiff body over a jutting rock. She certainly remembered this video, remembered replaying it over and over again not only to hear Rhei’s voice, or to feel like he was smiling at her through the screen, but mainly to feel the message he left her that day.

That being said… You and me, we’ll make a good team, I know it. I’ll do my thing, you’ll do yours, and it’ll work just as perfectly as I planned. The smile faded momentarily, allowing concern to cloud his features. He pressed his fingers against his closed eyes, and sighed. Look. It’ll get tough. We won’t always have the results we’re looking for, and you might stop and think sometimes, “Maybe I’m not cut out for this."

“In a lot of respects,” Sebastian murmured, “you still think so.”

He’d long since taken his eyes off Rhei, and instead stared at the smoke leaving his lips. As though feeling Kutone’s inquisitive expression on him, he took another pull of his cigarette.

Rhei went on from the phone in Sebastian’s hand. Just remember—you put in the work to get this far. This promotion, your shiny new desk, your title—Executive Assistant!—that was all you, Miss Kutone. If I need you to learn anything from me, that’s it, that this is all you, and I’m just riding on your coattails!

Don’t be afraid to give yourself credit, alright? Yoba knows I’ll be showering you with it as we work together, but please, be kind to yourself too.

Cigarette pursed between his lips, Sebastian turned a calculating gaze toward Kutone’s downcast features.
No matter what happens from here on out, never forget what you’re capable of. You have the proof right here. So run with it.

Sebastian spoke over Rhei’s final, “Well, enough sentimentality, I’ll see you tomorrow!” after blowing another wisp of smoke into the sky. “You said you didn’t want to be found.”

“Including you and Rhei, I don’t have the best track record in being kind to people.”

“That’s why you keep to yourself.”

“You’d know it as well as, if not better than, I do.”

“And if your old colleagues and exes found you because of the article, that affects you how?”

Kutone sighed, half-irritated, half-grateful for Sebastian’s careful-albeit-blunt questioning. “I don’t know what I’d say to them. What I’d do. I messed up badly before and I don’t want them to see me failing at something else.”

Sebastian clicked his tongue. “Then that’s what I don’t understand. What part of any of this would you call failing?”

“Not failing,” said Kutone. “It’s just—it’s not good enough. Yet. It’s not ready—I’m not ready—and I don’t want people from my past poking around and telling me what’s wrong. What I’m doing wrong, what I’m personally responsible for. I know it already.”

She pulled her legs close to her chest, and pressed her face into her knees. “I don’t need to hear it again.”

Smoke flavored the air again, as Sebastian blew out a troubled sigh. A gentle pressure rested on top of her head, at the same time he mumbled something resembling, “You are so goddamn stupid,” but not out of spite. Fondness softened his tone. His palm brushed back and forth over her hair. “But I guess, this just proves you have your moments too.”

Comfort rolling through her body in waves, Kutone lifted her face, just enough to meet Sebastian’s eye. “It’s proof,” he went on, more to himself than to Kutone, “that you need me sometimes too.”

Sometimes? He couldn’t even begin to guess how increasingly wrong he was, with each murmur, each breath, each smile, stroke, and moment he offered her. I can’t keep acting like this, she told herself. Come on, then. Pull yourself together. “Just give me a few minutes,” she said. “I’ll get over myself. Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” replied Sebastian. He pulled his hand back, and with a soft groan, stood up from the steps. Fitting his cigarette behind his ear, he took their breakfast and mugs on his way back inside, but not before planting a kiss on Kutone’s temple. “I’m here for you.”

Her muddied thoughts blew away, just like the remnants of Sebastian’s smoke once the mid-morning breeze swept through. Better than his coffee, better than sleeping with him, and almost as good as waking up next to him, his words and his touch unwound her tension more than even Kutone could imagine. She watched her screen door swing shut behind Sebastian, as he disappeared inside, presumably to the kitchen. Then came the clinks and clanks of dishware in the sink, followed by the rush of water over ceramic and silverware.

Kutone stood from her seat, as an idea seized her. Idea? Thought. Dream. Hope. She hesitated to invest herself in that hope, and reduced it to the smallest corner of her heart, but there was no getting rid of it.
Sebastian’s staying for me.

A rush of energy swelled through her, bouncing her up the steps and back inside. Before even she recognized her actions, she’d changed into her work clothes for the day. Pulling on the sleeves of her sun protectors, she was shuffling out her door when Sebastian, apparently finished with clearing away their minimal breakfast, stopped and turned her around.

“Let me borrow your phone for a bit.”

“For what?”

“Your ex left you a video message when you got promoted. I think I can do something better.”

Chapter End Notes

Again, it is ungodly-o-clock, and I'm barely blinking back sleep as I try to upload this.

Thank you, as always, for your patience, my dudes. The love you all send me, in hits, kudos, comments, bookmarks, subscriptions—all motivate me to see this project through to the end. I'm so thankful for all of you, and the support you give me no matter how late I upload these chapters.

You can find me at my tumblr if you want to send me questions, prompts, or just want to hang out. Seriously, flood my inbox if you'd like.
He needed to live her world, in order to become her best support.

There were other needs for Sebastian to address, like ventilation in the basement, cooling fans for his computer and laptop, and, much to Kutone’s objection, a haircut. At least, he’d assured her, enough of a trim he didn’t need to clip it back to keep his neck from sweltering during the summer.

These needs, however, were secondary to the objective he realized that morning after the Flower Dance, when he’d seen Kutone’s insecurity, when he’d heard the command in his own voice. Kutone’s world wasn’t just the Banks, much as she wanted it to be. She dragged the rest of her world—the city, her old job, past flames—from the crevassed corners of herself. And to really know those corners, to reach into those shadows and pull her back from herself, Sebastian needed to see Out There.

He’d do what he can Out Here, of course, which was why, after recharging her phone’s battery, he’d seized it for himself. Since Lewis’s encouragement had yet to move Kutone into accepting the Tribune’s interview, Sebastian had backed off of pushing her any further. Rather, during the week after the Flower Dance, he met with her often, and while she wasn’t looking, made good on his “better idea.”

Snap.

He’d heard town talk mention Haley being the resident landscape photographer, but asking for any help would start up the rumor mill. This was a project Sebastian wanted to do for himself, and keep it between him and Kutone.

Snap.

He hated mornings, but they were beautiful on the Banks. Summertime saw the sun’s rays peeking over the distant mountains, rendering the creeks and rivers of the farm into liquid crystal. Birds stirred into song and humidity already tingled against his cheek. Were this anywhere else, Sebastian would have beat a hasty retreat to his basement. But at Breezy Banks, he appreciated the anticipatory buzz of the morning, a sort of white noise that reminded him of the mountain lakeside.

So a morning smoke had gradually become his routine whenever he stayed the night with Kutone.

He gazed down at the pictures he’d just taken, amateur attempts at capturing what his body felt when watching the farm wake up. He’d captured the mist before the sunlight scattered it. The fractured light over the mountains. The hushing cascade of the rivers. The dewdrops gathering into a glassy pearl on the tip of a seedling. Himself, humiliated as he was to resort to selfies, taking his morning smoke, because he believed, deeply and sincerely, that Kutone was making him better.

Maybe a few more pictures, he thought, before arranging his work into a new album on her phone. He’d already decided on the comment to leave as the album title—*sometimes you need a different set of eyes to see what you do.*

At the sound of steps behind the door, Sebastian switched off the phone, and slid it into his back pocket. His sweatshirt would have been more useful for hiding phones, but Kutone had taken it the night before while they watched the stars over the valley. Wine hadn’t been enough to ward off the
Nighttime would be another good photo opportunity, he thought, as he turned to Kutone stepping out of the house. Having fallen asleep after a few glasses, she still wore his sweatshirt, just long enough to hide her shirt and jean shorts underneath. Only the rolled-up hems of those shorts were visible. “You’re up early,” she croaked, rubbing her eyes with one hand. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“Something like that.” Noting the grimace in Kutone’s features, he snuffed out his cigarette. Though he appreciated Kutone’s lack of complaints, it was still a habit he wanted to break, especially if… No. He wasn’t going to think about it right now, though it was a fantasy that lately plagued Sebastian’s thoughts. “You look hungover.”

“The grease on Gus’s pizza would do wonders for me right now,” she replied. “Lunch, maybe.” She then warily eyed him. “You’re still commandeering my phone?”

“I’m almost done. Did you need to make a call?”

While he’d been careful to avoid any specific topic, Kutone had apparently caught the suggestion. The Tribune. The corner of her lip twitched into a frown, as she shook her head. “Just wondering.” She turned to the yard, and the rest of the farm beyond the first bridge, and heaved an encumbered sigh. “Maybe I won’t go to Gus’s after all. Lewis will show up sooner or later. He’ll ask me about it again. And I’ll disappoint him. Again.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Who knows if he’ll even ask.”

“I sure don’t.” Kutone stretched her arms up, allowing the sleeves of Sebastian’s sweatshirt to slide down, and the collar of his hood to ride up against her nose and mouth. “I guess I’ll get to work,” she said, dropping her arms. Then pulling the hoodie up over her head, she handed it to Sebastian. “You should take it back before I muck it up.”

He blinked. God forbid she realized he lately appreciated watching her in his clothes. “Hold on to it,” he said. “I’m sure I’ll be back here soon, anyway.”


She definitely knew, or she was bluffing to eke out a confession. Sebastian avoided her calculating stare by shaking out another cigarette. “Keep telling yourself that,” he replied, fishing in his pants pocket for his lighter. Not that he necessarily wanted another smoke, but the clinks of the silver latch at least rang louder than the heated pang in his chest. “No one wears it better than I do.”

“Careful, Sebby.” Her whisper, like an alluring hiss, shot pleasured shivers up his spine. “You know I like a challenge.”

He could only stare after her, as she crept back inside. There was no winning against that woman.

Scratch that. There was one way he could win. It was a crap shot at best, knowing her devilish ability to turn tables, but the numbers on Sebastian’s spreadsheet later that day promised at least a hint of surprise from Kutone. A sad type of surprise for her, most likely, but she’d listen. She’d understand.

Sebastian leaned back on his stool, his back against the wall as he scanned and re-scanned the
spreadsheet. He hadn’t mistyped any of the formulas. The numbers were all the closest estimates he’d calculated over the last few years. Nothing was broken. The spreadsheet was working, showing the slew of projects he’d taken over the winter had significantly buffed his budget.

Conclusion? As long as he found a place that fit his budget, he could get started Out There.

He’d been regularly freelancing with a software company based in Zuzu City. If he could provide a good cover letter, and write a resume highlighting the work he’d done for them, they might give him an on-site position. Three things: a place to stay, a cover letter, a resume. Just three things left to do, and he could roll out of the valley toward a better version of himself.

Don’t announce this to Sam, he told himself. Not to Abigail, not to his mother, Maru, or Demetrius. Only Kutone, who Sebastian hoped would help him with these last three tasks. Once he finalized these last three details, then he’d tell his friends and family.

But how would Kutone take the news?

*I have no right to stop you. I wouldn’t stop you, because you have every right to live your life like you want…*

Gracefully, no doubt. But she told him she’d want to stop him, if only to keep him with her. A part of him knew he’d probably stay, just for her sake. Just to make sure she had no reason to cry.

A train horn bugled in the distance, its sonorous rumble prompting Sebastian’s thoughts to return to an old teenage memory. There was a night the train had stopped in Pelican Town. With Sam and Abigail, he’d split the cost of a few spray cans, and in the dead of night, stole out to one of the cars. Clumsier in practice, they’d made themselves into amateur graffiti artists. Something like that.

Standing from his seat, he trudged to his closet and slid the door along its bearings. His desklight caught the metallic gleam of a can toward the front of the closet space. So he hadn’t even bothered trying to hide it. He took the spray can in hand, and shook until the telltale clacks reverberated in his ears. Still live.

Each of their brands was likely still on that car. Sam’s and Abigail’s tags were long lost from Sebastian’s memories, but he remembered his—saw it in his thoughts—clearly like the night they’d pulled it off. Whether from recall or from handling the can, Sebastian couldn’t tell, but the paint’s chemical pungence swept him back in time, in age, in maturity, to the childish idea that clung on to, *Maybe, just maybe, he’ll see it if I do it.* Dumb kid.

He snorted at his past self, and put the can of spray paint back into his closet. He could probably smuggle it over to his mother’s workshop, and put her under the impression she’d missed this paint in her quarterly inventory count. The perfect crime.

But nostalgia crept like vines up Sebastian’s chest, and there was only way to untangle the mess on his own. Lighter and pack of cigarettes in his back pockets, he left the basement, and slunk outside.

Even though that summer afternoon crept down into dusk, Stardew Valley’s humidity still prickled his skin as soon as he stepped out. His mother’s stellar work with insulating and air conditioning the house had spoiled him rotten. Where Sebastian, regretting his decision, would have normally retreated back inside, a profound need to see his teenage self’s work—if it was on this train—pressed him onward. Around the corner of the yard, past Maru’s telescope, up the cliff steps, and past the community spa, Sebastian, already huffing against the fatigue and inwardly vowing to quit smoking, walked.
He pondered following the railroad again, like he and Kutone had strolled along it once upon an autumn, but a wall of immobile train cars blocked his path. Strange. Hardly any passengers got off at Pelican Town, and the cargo trains usually rolled right past. Maybe it was a cargo train for Joja, choosing to unload their merchandise here in Pelican Town, rather than the next station where the warehouses probably were. But that, Sebastian thought, also made no sense.

To his right, toward the passenger dock and beyond the wall of cars, men’s troubled voices were in conversation.

“…tree fell up ahead. You’d think they’d notice that.”

“You expect the inspectors to come out to the boonies to find that?”

“But it’s weird. No lightning storms these past few weeks, and there’s a freshly downed tree on the tracks.”

“Someone cut it, obviously, just to screw up our timetables.”

“That tree wasn’t cut. You saw it. Like it got ripped out of the dirt. The boys say it’s valley magic.”

The other man guffawed, loudly. “So you’re going to let boonie voodoo get in the way of perishable product getting to the warehouses? I knew you were out of your mind, but boy, have you got a lickin’ coming…”

It wasn’t voodoo, thought Sebastian, absently thumbing his earring, and it wasn’t so simple of an explanation as “valley magic.” If he learned anything from spring, it was that nothing in his world was so simple anymore. He could surprise them. Really scare the shit out of them, if he took off this piercing. What would they call the ice locking their wheels frozen, and the boy that ice came from? Sorcery, he hoped.

Not that it would be worth worrying Kutone. Or putting his life in danger again.

Turning away from the voices— remarking on the twilight as a sign to find the floodlights and work through the night—Sebastian strolled toward his left, head craned up to see the artwork spiraling across the cars. And what eye-openers they were. Many of the ballooned letters and vibrant colors spat contempt for Joja. Others glowed with prayers to Yoba, for the soldiers deployed and the broken men and women coming home from the war. Still others were gang symbols from the city, the names acting as declarations of seized territory. Those pieces were the most active, with other groups—both violent and pacifist—crowding the same canvas with impressive repertoires of stylized art. Animals, weapons, fire and water, even allusions to Void and Solar—they made a makeshift art gallery as Sebastian walked along.

A few cars down, just before the tunnel, was the least impressive of them all. The spray work, amateurish, in the clumsy block letters using nothing but black paint. Blue letters on one side, clearly done by someone else, and purple letters on the other side, also by a different artist. In comparison to the canvasses before, these paled and hurt to look at, but they were, Sebastian thought with a smile, his and his friends’ work.

He pressed his palm against the metal surface, its warmth from the weather curling past his skin and into a painful knot in his stomach. This message, after all, wasn’t just a dumb attempt at graffiti.

SEB WAS HERE

It was a call to someone far away. And, an attempt to send himself as far from the valley as possible.
But there was a new addition to his canvas, visible only when Sebastian stepped back. A heart? Definitely not something he drew, yet it looked like it belonged as a set with his message.

What could it mean? It wasn’t in Abigail’s purple paint, nor Sam’s blue. He couldn’t think of anyone else in Pelican Town wanting to front as a newbie graffiti artist. This happened away from town, he concluded, away from Stardew Valley. His heart rate climbed. His breath shortened. Keep it cool, he told himself. Don’t read too much into it.

But it could be, couldn’t it? He could wish for at least a possibility! That big, hazy, humming maybe! It could be! It just could be!

Show Kutone.

She could validate him. Could share this flooding emotion with him. Or she could reel him back. Either way, he needed her to see this. He turned and raced back into town, adrenaline dulling the stitch in his side and pumping the hope in his chest.

Twilight dimmed into a moonless night, by the time Sebastian dashed up the steps of the Breezy Banks farmhouse. “Kutone!” he called, pounding on the door. “Kutone, come on, we don’t have time!”

An alarmed Kutone, clearly preparing for bed from her shorts and top, threw open the door. Her eyes were wide and alert. “Don’t have time for what?”

“Dress all in black,” Sebastian replied, adjusting the strap of his bag. “Wear shoes you can run in, and bring something to cover your nose and mouth. Mask, scarf, bandanna, something.”

Her alarm settled into wariness. “What are you about to make me do?”

“Help me! I’m about to make you help me, Kutone, so please!”

Even he was surprised at the desperation in his voice, as Kutone—right, okay, i’ll be back in a few seconds—disappeared back inside. The minutes felt like hours, until Kutone, dressed as instructed, appeared again. She closed the door behind her, and followed Sebastian at a jog before he broke into a sprint. “Talk to me, Sebastian!” she urged between huffs.

“I will when we get there!”

The backwoods road was thankfully a smooth run, and both took the cliff steps two at a time. She veered left with him, and slowed down as they approached the stopped train. Incredulity creased her features into a frown as she eyed the long line of cars. “They don’t usually stop here, do they?”

Sebastian, settling his excitement down, slid his pack off and fished around in the bag’s front pockets. After scanning underneath and down the line for patrols, he pulled up his hood, and switched on a palm-sized flashlight. Noting Kutone’s attention on his teenaged self’s message, he switched off the light. “I am actually mortified to show you this,” he whispered.

“You know I’d only do this if I have a damn good reason.” Sebastian switched on his light again, this time pointing the flashlight at the addition to his tag. “That. I didn’t draw that.”
She stared a while, glancing between the image and Sebastian’s expectant look. “Sweetie,” she finally replied, rubbing her face, “it’s another piece of graffiti that just happens to be shaped like a heart.” Suppressing a yawn, she swept an arm across, indicating the line of train cars before them. “Likely because there wasn’t enough canvas space.”

Talk about a jarring slap of sobering reality, but Sebastian had expected as much from Kutone. Even so, he thought, switching off his flashlight again, he had to make her see the possibility. “All three of us—me, Sam, Abigail—we had a go at it,” said Sebastian. “Seemed like the right thing to do at the time, stupid teens that we were.”

“It’s cute. I’ll give it that.”

“It wasn’t just another rebellious phase, you know.” As Kutone’s silhouette turned to him, Sebastian gazed up at the vandalized train car. Nighttime darkness wavered like tendrils in the wind, obscuring his message across the metal.

He pressed his hand against the train car. “I heard this bit of trivia once,” he started. “Or folklore. When the trains first started running across the country, only the rich people could afford a ride. And because the poor wanted a ride too, to see the other side of the world, they came up with an alternative.”

“Graffiti on the train?”

“Basically. By drawing their names onto the train, they believed they could send at least a fragment of themselves to see the world they physically couldn’t. Like sending a piece of their soul, I guess. A prayer.”

Kutone stepped closer, nudging her shoulder against Sebastian’s arm. “I never took you to be a praying type.”

“And I’m not.” He slid his palm down the metal surface. “But I ended up hoping. The trains—the cars themselves—go cross-country and back. I started thinking that, maybe if I announced myself, he would come home.”

She froze. “Your father?” A pause. “Sebastian, I’m sorry—I didn’t realize that was the significance—!”

“Come on. I didn’t expect you to know. That’s why I’m showing you.” He slid his hand over, stopping when he thought he was touching the heart. “I was trying to send myself—my name—to my dad. Let him know I was here and still waiting. I was going to tell him everything, too. How Mom had moved on and gave me a sister I never asked for. How Demetrius tried so hard to be my friend and my father at the same time, but that he couldn’t do it like Dad could.”

In the middle of pulling together a list in his head, of all the things he wanted to talk about with his father, Kutone cut in, her statement simple. “Tell me about him.”

He’d always appreciated this straightforward attentiveness Kutone offered when she played the role of listener. She was never the type to simply nod along to a story—electing instead to always ask for more. While to the ignorant, her poise insinuated apathy, Sebastian, after watching her for the past seven months, knew the signs he needed to look for. She’d cock her head to the side. She’d cross either her arms or her legs—right then she crossed her legs and tucked her hands behind her back—and she’d speak in short sentences, but in a gentle tone to coax out an answer.

“He’d like you,” Sebastian murmured. “He always appreciated quiet people. Mom was the only
exception, I think.”

He waited for the rusted cogs of his memory to wrench awake, as Kutone took his flashlight and shined its beam on the train car, before going on. “Dad was the town’s mechanic. Taught me a fair bit and took me riding on the bike. Said he always liked the feel of the wind getting chillier the further he rode out from the valley.”

“Like father, like son,” replied Kutone.

“Not completely.” Yet, there was no restraining the grin that stole across his features. Thank goodness Kutone concentrated on the clumsy paint job instead. “For me, it’s freedom from my own head. I can’t even guess what it was for him.”

“Did you pick up smoking from him too?”

“How’d you figure?”

The light’s dissipation caught the shrug of her shoulders. “You loved him enough that his disappearance pushed you into a contract with a yeti boy. And, kids like to take after their parents.”

Sharp girl. “It was a half-empty pack he left behind. In the lobby. On the sidetable next to the couch. I took his lighter too—this thing…” He fished in back pocket, and pulled the silver lighter out into the light. “I haven’t used any other, you know.”

She took the lighter from his palm, and turned it in her fingertips. “I believe it.” A snort masked her chuckle. “You fidget with it too.”

“Tricks,” Sebastian corrected, taking the lighter back. A flip, a clink, a snap of his wrist, a twirl between his fingers. “I learned the complicated stuff on my own, but Dad taught me the basics. Mom always wondered how I burned myself so often as a kid.”

After another flip, the lighter’s latch closed in his fist. The finality of the sound had both Sebastian and Kutone gazing up again at the train car. “So,” Kutone started, “you think this heart is your father’s response?”

“I know it’s stupid to think so. Having you say it could be anyone else—that helped.”

“I really am sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. I’m not being spiteful.”

Truly, he wasn’t. If he could tell his father about this woman, and all the sides and angles from which he’d fallen for her, the conversation would have gone until dawn. “I really wish you could meet him, Kutone.”

The beam of light fell from the train car, and clicked off. They stood side-by-side in darkness together, unmoving and unspeaking, until Kutone whispered, “All this talk of you leaving the valley—was part of it to go find him, Sebastian?”

“Probably.”

“You’d look for him in the city first.”

“For leads, at least.”

“Suppose, then, you found nothing there.” Her steps ground into the dirt, as she turned to him again.
“No one knew anything about your father. Never even seen him. Then where would you go?”

Truthfully, he’d never thought this far. The notion of finding Dad, after all, had been nothing but a vague idea in Sebastian’s head. Maybe a part of him had given up a long time ago, and forced him to focus instead on his own needs. He shrugged his response.


Each hypothetical step she voiced wedged a slab of pain deep into his chest. But more than the thought of never finding Dad, it was imagining Kutone alone that almost made Sebastian choke.

She sighed, as though bracing herself for an expected response. “You’re out of the valley,” she said. “You’re free to do as you please. Would you ever come home?”

“I would.” The words were out of his mouth before he thought them. “I would come home. To—to you.”

It rolled off his voice a lot more naturally than he’d assumed, halted as he was by his own embarrassment. “Somehow,” Sebastian continued, “over these past few months, I really feel like I belong here. It’s not just wishful thinking. I know it. It starts here, somewhere in my gut, and it—it just—just rises, right up into my throat.”

“Should I be worried about this?”

“Don’t be—it’s right, Kutone. I belong—it’s right.”

He glanced once toward the message he’d sprayed. Thought about the concept of home, the destination of a name. How that same name belonged here, in Kutone’s voice, across her lips and in her kiss, and he realized, with an ever-sharpening pang of guilt—he had to tell her.

“Kutone,” Sebastian started, “I have enough to leave town.”

For a moment, there was only the sound of her steady breath, neither catching or quickening. Maybe an expectant, inconspicuous sigh, but her voice was still placid. Quiet, with no suggestion of a smile. “That’s great.”

Considering how much she’d cried about it before, how much she avoided the topic, her neutral response was anticlimactic at best. Not that Sebastian could expect anything else from someone as distant as Kutone. Was she holding back for his sake? Or maybe she’d already taken his statement to heart. He pressed it again, to make sure.

“I’ll come home.”

The shake of her head freed a lock of her hair from under her hood. “I wouldn’t make any promises, if I were you. It’s a great big world out there—who knows who you’ll end up meeting.”

So her cynicism took precedence. That made sense.

Then he moved without thinking, reaching into his bag again as he directed Kutone to shine the light on the train car. “Who knows, indeed,” said Sebastian, pulling out and shaking a can of black spray paint. Lifting a mask over his nose and mouth, he met what he took as Kutone’s incredulous expression. *You’re really going to do this? “Maybe if we’re accomplices in vandalism, you’ll believe me.”*
“I could just drop this light and run.”

“You wouldn’t leave me behind.”

“Watch me.”

“Not when I’m about to take my name off this thing.”

She stopped mid-pivot, and turned back, flashlight still pointed at the ground. “But if your dad’s still out there…”

“He doesn’t need to know anymore. Or maybe he already knows—that’s why he drew that dumb heart next to my message. If it really was him. I can hope a little, can’t I?” He tested a few sprays, stepped back, and pointed the can at the train car. “I have a place to come back to. My name doesn’t need to go anywhere anymore.”

The flashlight’s beam struck the scrawled message, and narrowed as Kutone approached. “Give me one,” she said, sticking out her free hand. He blindly reached back into his pack and passed a spray can into Kutone’s open palm. “You take one side. I’ll do the other.”

She cast the light across their metal canvas one more time, before lifting a scarf over her nose and mouth, and shaking her spray paint to life. The chemical hiss of their work, interrupted now and then by the clacks of their cans, hushed any remaining argument between them.

This hadn’t been Sebastian’s initial plan. Yet, as each sweep of his arm covered his side of the message in a coat of black paint, contentment rose in him. After all, wishing for optimism from Kutone, especially regarding the source of an anonymous picture, was downright foolish. A part of him likely knew and expected she’d lay reality on him instead.

And he was grateful. She’d helped him grow, again.

So there was no more need for Dad to find him.

Kutone, spreading deep violet across the metal, dropped her arm for just one moment. “I think it’s okay to hope,” she said. “As long as you don’t let it eat you up. Not that you need me to warn you, right?”

“Not really.”

A muffled snort puffed through her scarf, as she began spraying again. “I’ll be here,” she said, “whenever you decide to come home. Hopefully I’ll still have the Banks running by the time you get back.”

The Banks. The photos. He had to show those to her, show her the beauty she’d breathed back into a land the townspeople once thought dead. His message was almost entirely blocked out, Kutone making the last few violet sweeps across. “About that—!”

**Hey! You kids thinking you can pull this off? Hah?**!

A separate flashlight shined straight at them, barely catching their features as they ducked under their hoods. Lumbering footfalls stampeded toward them. Sebastian crammed his can back into his bag, and torpedoed into a sprint, while Kutone flipped off her flashlight and followed at a close dash. When had the workers come back from clearing the tree? To think, he hadn’t even heard their
patrolling steps coming toward them, let alone noticed their floodlights!

Yells rallying behind them, they skidded around the corner of the spa, and cleared the cliff steps in wide leaps, much to the screaming chagrin of their stretched muscles, strained lungs, and pounding hearts. Hopefully that shudder and pop weren’t coming from his bones when he landed, but he barely had a chance to hiss against his landing shock, as Kutone wrenched him up from the ground. Half-pushing, half-dragging him toward the backwoods trail, she helped him veer around another corner, and hurtled into the underbrush of the darkened forest.

While Sebastian crumpled into a winded heap, Kutone steadied herself on her hands and knees. Slowed her gasps into deep breaths.

One moment.

Two moments.

The shouts of the train workers echoed down the mountain. His mother and Demetrius would definitely find out about it come the next morning.

Three moments.

Heavy footsteps and scattered flashlights skittered through the trees and along the ground. Kutone crept back from the path and pressed her body against Sebastian. “Breathe with me.”

Four moments.

She pulled both her hood and his further up their heads, and placed her palm against his chest. “Keep it quiet,” she said. “Calm down.”

Her fingertips caught every hammering palpitation of his heart. The high of the thrill and the nausea of his anticipation drew him further and further away from himself. He wheezed. Swayed. The shadows ringing his vision weren’t just nighttime tricks of darkness. She seized him by his shirt. “Sebastian,” she whispered, “Sebastian, stay with me.”

He kissed her, the sound of lips touching bringing him back. “Sorry,” he said, and kissed her again. “I’m here.”

Five moments.

The voices, the footsteps, the lights, faded. Stillness reigned in the summery night, hung like veils from the ringed canopy of pines above them, and suspended the dotted sky. Relief undid the tense knot of silence between them, and both breathed heavily before lying down on the ground.

Hands woven together in the grass between them, they sighed again. Breaths hitched into chuckles, then to restrained laughter.

“You never told me you were a thrill-seeker!” said Kutone. “And I never knew you could run so fast!”

“It’s a hidden ability,” Sebastian replied. “But I can only do this once every blue moon—the excitement’s too much for a smoker’s heart and lungs.”

“You’re not getting sick, are you?”

“No.” Gripping her hand tighter, Sebastian turned his head, and watched her breathe. “Not at all.”
He looked back up at the forest canopy. While crickets hummed and forest animals rustled through the brush, he thought again about his place to call home. “You know,” he started, voice croaking, “you don’t realize just how incredible you are.”

“I don’t,” said Kutone, “because I’m not that special. I just live my life the way I want.”

“That’s how you do it.” Groaning, Sebastian sat back up, and pulled his pack over. Opening one of the bag’s myriad pockets, he rummaged inside and fished out Kutone’s phone. “Everything that you do, that you deal with, that you say—you’ve changed me for the better, and that makes you one of the most incredible people in my life.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” She sat up with him and, accepting her phone back, waved it with a smirk. “Was this your plan this entire time?”

“Spur of the moment. I made some changes you might want to take a look at.”

The phone’s backlight illuminated Kutone’s features, framed by both her hair and her hood, as she switched it on. A split second’s confusion creased her brow, as she tapped the new icon on her screen. “Photos,” she murmured. “Good title for an album too, but… wait…” Pauses slowed each swipe of her finger, while the backlight caught the bedazzlement in her features. “You took these?”

“I’ve had your phone this entire time.”

“But where at? These pictures—they’re like a different world!”

“The Banks, Kutone. That’s your land.”

She stopped, fingertip hovering over her screen. “‘Sometimes you need a different set of eyes…’ Oh my god.” She swiped back through the photos. “Oh my god. This is the river, by Grandpa’s shrine. The new crops. The fields the livestock graze at, and the rabbits’ clover patches.” Light caught her welling tears, as she pressed her free hand over her mouth. “And these are the flower beds! And the greenhouse, all still so shitty and yet so pretty! And that’s—is that?—that’s Oki, isn’t it? Sleeping on the front porch? That’s the view in the morning! And that’s… this is…”

She’d frozen, eyes wide, on the last photo of the album: his selfie. “That,” Sebastian coughed, “that one’s a bit more self-indulgent, I guess. Dunno what I was thinking—you can delete it, so just—!”

“—Why would I, Sebastian? You’re so beautiful.”

A hot flare rose up his cheeks, as Kutone pressed her phone against her chest. She went on. “Stop. I know. As a guy, it’s not something you want to hear as a compliment, but it’s true.” This time, the backlight caught her blushing smile, as she gazed down at the screen again. He was beautiful? She sure was one to talk. “You’re saying you can look like this because of me?”

Sebastian nodded, embarrassment overheating him too much for a verbal response.

“All of these photos…” Kutone’s voice caught on even more tears. “You’re saying these are all me.”

“Your boss said something similar, didn’t he?”

“Screw him.” After a short sniffle, she pocketed her phone, and crawled into Sebastian’s arms. Their combined weight pushed them back on the ground, Kutone’s ear and cheek on Sebastian’s chest, while he embraced her from below. “Screw both of you.”

A chuckle laced the end of her comment, prompting a smile from Sebastian. “You’re welcome,” he
said. “I’m glad you liked it.”

He wondered what time it was, the moonless night showing no signs of passing time. Maybe the sky was lightening in the east, the stars fading as they fled from approaching dawn. With Kutone’s weight on top of him, though, and his own heart pulsing a soft rhythm into Kutone’s listening ear, this immediate space—this place he belonged—was timeless.


Sebastian sat bolt upright, catching Kutone by her shoulders. “You’d do that for me?”

She used a sleeve to wipe her wet eyes, and nodded. “I did say I wouldn’t stop you. In fact, I—I want to support you. I mean, I can’t just wait around. I have to make you miss me.”

“You won’t have to try too hard.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Kutone swallowed the rest of her tears, and cleared her voice. “I’ll take the interview too. Maybe negotiate something so they don’t reveal too much about me, but I’ve got to keep building that place up.”

“You’ll be fine,” Sebastian replied.

“I have to be,” said Kutone. “So that you have a home to come back to. Whenever you need a place to stop and rest—a safe place—just come find me.”

There was a breeziness to her voice then, that swept away the rest of Sebastian’s doubts. At the same time he’d arrived at his future course, she’d somehow reached hers. What Kutone didn’t know, however, was the flash of an image in Sebastian’s thoughts, of a future even beyond the individual courses they’d decided. A moment where those courses intersected, intertwined, and ran together into timelessness.

He brushed a touch against her cheek, and pressed his forehead against hers. “You don’t have to worry about that, either,” he said. “I’m already here.”

Chapter End Notes

Yo. Yooooo check it out, I can upload at a decent-ish time! My schedule's been thrown out of whack so it's been a bit difficult to keep up, but I did it this week! I'll be working to get the next chapter up even earlier next week!

That being said, thanks as always, folks, for all the support you've been giving me and this fic. Please keep sending me those hits, those kudos, comments, bookmarks, and subscriptions, because all of these will carry me on a wave to the very end of the story. While I won't start a countdown yet, it's approaching!

Find me at my tumblr to ask me anything!
In the Hollow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Negotiations for anonymity fell completely through, but, Kutone’s smiling face on the cover of the Stardew Valley Tribune was—at least—incredibly charming. The Tribune’s photographers knew how to take a good photo. Seating Kutone, in her summertime plaid shirt and carpenter shorts, cross-legged on top of a wine barrel, they used the riverscape and bright sky as her background, and embellished the foreground with everything related to the Banks: hoe, watering can, axe and fishing pole, baskets of blueberries, ears of yellow, blue, and multicolored corn, round pink melons and red cabbage, peppers and radishes. In the photo’s blurred distance, just over Kutone’s shoulder, golden wheat fields shimmered with the sway of tall sunflowers, with bolts of orange poppies running along the ground.

*Good grief*, Kutone thought, flipping her commemorative copy open, *look at how happy this girl looks.*

An elated Mayor Lewis, drumming up Pelican Town’s excitement for the end-of-summer edition of the Tribune, had specially ordered enough copies for each household. It made those last two weeks of the season hellish for Kutone, fielding dazzled comments and congratulations no matter which corner she turned in town.

Even the Junimos at the community center knew, and incessantly danced around her whenever she dropped off their requested goods.

Nausea, she decided, was her reaction to overwhelming, unwanted attention, when a smirking Sebastian, Tribune in hand, answered his basement door. “You wouldn’t mind if I framed this, right?”

“So long as you don’t mind me destroying it soon as you put it up.”

It was the day of Kutone’s second Moonlight Jelly viewing. Figuring Sebastian’s basement would provide sweet reprieve from the doting townspeople, she’d stopped by the mountain house, and slipped in while Robin was away, to pass the time until the evening. So much for avoiding attention.

Sebastian, closing his door as Kutone pushed past him, chuckled. “I wouldn’t let you, Kutone. It’s a nice picture. Decent article, too.”

She smoothed out the pleats of her dress—which she’d worn to futilely distance herself from the girl on the cover—and sat down on the edge of Sebastian’s bed. “My phone’s been ringing non-stop,” she grumbled. “Texts from Mom, Dad, Rhei, old coworkers—*Yoba above, Kutone, you’re still alive!*”

Her boyfriend sat down next to her. “So people found you, just like you were afraid of.”

“Which is why I don’t appreciate you flailing that magazine in my face when I’m here seeking asylum.”

“And you’re sure you don’t need a smoke,” said Sebastian. He gazed down at the cover again. “But you look legitimately happy.”

The mattress heaved as Kutone fell sideways onto it. “Habit,” she huffed. “That’s a marketing
Sebastian laid down behind her. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pushed her hair aside to press a kiss on the back of her neck. “I don’t think so.”

Despite his faint whisper tickling down her spine, Kutone rolled onto her back and shot a glare in response. “I’m sure you’re saying that because you’re a nice boyfriend.” She hoped she was scowling. “But I’m not sure I enjoy your confidence and assertion regarding something so inherently Past Me.”

“You’ll have to enjoy it—I’ve been picking up clues from you. But let me ask you this.” He levered himself up and over her, letting his hair fall against her cheek. “You were afraid of people finding you. Of having to face them. Has that happened?”

She swallowed down an exasperated groan. This careful parsing was what she needed, but an arrogant part of her still recoiled from Sebastian’s logic. “They’re trying to get in touch with me. Technically, they have found me.”

“Okay. So out of the messages you’ve seen so far, has anyone tried confronting you?”

Fine, she thought, he was right, as always, when he started his interrogation. *Just shut up, kiss me, and be done already.* “No,” she answered instead. “It’s been mostly congratulations.”

He nodded, as if expecting this answer. “I think,” he started, “people move on a lot more quickly than we give them credit for. Not saying there aren’t people who don’t drag their past around—you’ve seen me—but most people figure out when it’s time to move on.”

“So I should too?”

“I wish you would. But that’s not for me to decide, is it?”

Let go of her guilt. Move on. Sensible in theory, not so much in practice.

Sebastian, likely noticing Kutone’s grimace, pressed a kiss onto the corner of her lips. “That’s all I can do or say about this,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Sometimes, a little bit’s enough.” She craned her head up, grazed a breathy *Thank you* against Sebastian’s lip, and then, laughing, pushed up on his chest. “Off, Sebby. You’re turning me on.”

Unrelenting, Sebastian first pressed a kiss on Kutone’s fingertips, then pinned her hand down on the bed. “And I’m not sorry,” he replied, suckling a kiss on her lip. “We have time, and I have protection. Just keep it down so no one comes barging in.”

The difficulty of letting go and moving on, Kutone conceded, was finding replacements. If her vices ceased to define her, then what would take their places? The thought maybe came from some old cultural idealism that proclaimed a woman’s vice made her beautiful. Maybe Kutone had internalized it to the point there was no detaching her identity from guilt. Regret, too. They shaped the tapers of her eyes, and firmed the pout of her lip. She stood the way she did and watched the world darken with a well-sculpted distance, because guilt shaped her and her vision of a cold, dark, and lonely world.

Melodrama and melancholy made her beautiful, and netted her catches like Rhei and Sebastian. Guilt
and regret made her insurmountable identity. Abandoning devices that worked so well was a difficult concept at best.

The Dance of the Moonlight Jellies seemed the proper night to contemplate the issue, even as she stood, fingers loosely interlocked, with Sebastian. Sam and Abigail had thankfully dropped the Tribune celebrations, and, much like last year, talked music. They liked their current direction, and something about a university block party accepting their band’s audition tape, and so might possibly have a gig toward the end of fall.

Kutone pulled herself out of her thoughts just long enough to smile and congratulate them.

Sam, oblivious to Kutone’s reservations, beamed. “Think about it! Exactly this day last year, you helped us decide on this direction for the band. Now we’re about to have our first performance in front of a huge audience—it’s crazy!”

“Another blessing from the town’s Lucky Star.” Abigail confronted Kutone’s confused expression with a laugh. “You didn’t read your own article? Lewis’s coinage.”

“Look, I’m lucky nothing.” said Kutone, pulling her jacket close against the chilly sea breeze. “You guys asked me a question, and I answered.”

Sam jabbed a finger in Kutone’s direction. “And that was the lucky draw! We could have asked anyone else, but we turned to you! No, no, don’t get me started!” While Abigail threw an arm around Kutone’s shoulders, Sam went for Sebastian. “This day last year was the town’s lucky break—’cause it’s also the day this dude fell in lurve.”

Sebastian heaved back hard enough to nearly throw Sam into the water. “Lay off.”

Abigail snickered, and pointed at their held hands. “But you don’t deny it, do you? I’m surprised Kutone never caught you endlessly ogling her.”

“I did,” said Kutone, unable to repress her smile. “He has a particular fascination with my hair.”

Sebastian snapped to wide-eyed attention. “Stop—!”

Total understanding cracked like lightning across Sam’s features. “That’s right! I remember that!”

“When did I—?”

“In the middle of your hopelessly blue autumn crush! Yoba above, I knew I had to forgive you being so god-awful melodramatic, but you wouldn’t shut up! Her hair, Sam, it’s her goddamn hair!”

Sebastian’s hand, icy yet clammy, gripped hers tighter. “I never said that!”

Abigail, feigning ignorance by examining her nails, snorted. “He said something to the effect of, I have a hair fetish and I don’t know what to do.”

“Kutone, believe me—!” His voice was faint, weakened from his fiery embarrassment. “I never implied—!”

“Look at this emotion!” Sam cried. “This variety of expressions! Abby, our baby boy can finally, truly, honestly emote!”

“I will push you off this dock,” Sebastian hissed, “And even if a jelly sting zaps your pudding brain into mush, I won’t give a—!”
Kutone stopped him with a touch on his chest. “Hey,” she said, “I’ve already dug you a deep hole. No need to jump further into it.”

His racing heart slowed against her fingertips, as awed Sam and Abigail watched with mouths agape. “That is an apology, right?”

She nodded, and dropped her hand. “I’m sorry for insinuating you get off on my hair.” A bated pause sunk in, as restored peace drew out a sigh from Sebastian. Oh dear. He set himself up too well. “But I do speak from our recent—”

“—No.”

“—Personal experience. Just this afternoon!”

“Kutone!”

While Sam and Abigail collapsed, laughing, on the dock, Sebastian, resisting the urge to make good on his threats, marched away, dragging Kutone with him. Down the pier and across the sandbar, he ignored the sand sifting into his shoes and maintained the almost-painful grip on her hand.

They crossed the bridge to the shoals, and stopped at the lip of a tide pool. Sebastian shook off Kutone’s hand, and wordlessly pulled out his cigarettes and lighter. The rattle of the sticks, the hiss of his cursing, and the uncooperative clinks and sparks of his lighter—Oh dear, thought Kutone. He was genuinely pissed.

“Sebastian—”

“No.” Rage making his hands tremble, he fumbled with his lighter. “I’ll eventually forgive you,” he said. “Eventually. Right now, though? I can’t—I’m so—fuck, what is wrong with this thing?!”

Chewing her lip, she held her palm open. “Let me.”

“I’ll do it—I’ll get it, just lay off—!”

“Please. Let me.”

Unlit cigarette hanging awkwardly between his lips, he finally relented, and dropped his lighter into Kutone’s hand. She sparked a flame to life, but as he leaned in to light up, he stopped. “No,” he said, yanking his cigarette out. “No, no, no, what the fuck—!” Swinging wide, he threw the cigarette far into the forest behind the beach. “What the hell am I doing?!”

She flipped the lighter closed, plunging the space between them back into darkness. “I’m sorry,” Kutone murmured. She watched as Sebastian pressed his hands over his face and sunk into a squat. “I didn’t mean to…”

“I’m overreacting,” he replied. “That’s what it is. What it’s always been.”

They were together, in a sense, together staring at their feet, together letting the sea breeze inadequately speak for them, because at that moment, Kutone’s voice failed. She’d apologized, and he said he’d forgive her, but what came after that? The taste of another apology already felt sour. Nothing she rehearsed in her head could wash it down.

Sebastian raked both hands through his hair, and with an aggravated tension pulling his shoulders, he stood up and stalked past Kutone to the dock. He shoved his hands into the front pocket of his sweatshirt, and scuffed a kick at the edge of the wood.
The jellyfish floated in.

Last year, they’d sat together at the edge of the dock. She talked. He listened. They were quiet. He’d wound a lock of her hair around his finger, and for the first startling time, he was beautiful. Still was, of course, but the notion was hard to express in the middle of Sebastian’s agitation. Even Kutone understood there was no distracting him this time around.

Sighing, Sebastian sat down on the wood. Blues and whites flared alive then dimmed in alternating pulses, the jellyfishes’ watery light show just as dazzling as the year before. But even though Kutone and Sebastian were together in the same space, isolation separated them. For Kutone, watching Sebastian’s back, giving no signs of his turning around to beckon her close, to smile at her, to accept her, dug a choking wedge into her throat.

Ah, she thought. Regret. Guilt. That thing she couldn’t let go of, and here it was, challenging her through her boyfriend’s back. Other times before, she ran away from it. Masked the strangling clutch in her chest with pleasure and heartbreak, claiming these physical things gave her validation. Excuses to hide excuses.

She closed the distance between them with careful steps, and knelt behind Sebastian. “I’m sorry,” she said again. She pressed her hands against his back, in the hopes she could rekindle his usual warmth. Up, up his back, Kutone dragged her hands, thumbs grazing over his spine, palms rolling over his shoulder blades, fingertips curling up and over to his collar. “It was mean of me.”

“I’m not about to sit here and deny it,” Sebastian replied. “There’s some truth to it. It was one of the first things about you I really and truly noticed. Like, wow, this woman’s hair is insanely pretty.”

“But I didn’t need to humiliate you over it.”

“No. You didn’t.”

She trailed her fingers up his neck, dragging his hood along. The direction of the wind changed, sweeping Sebastian’s black hair into her face. Smooth, silky, unlike her coarse hair, especially on days she chose to forgo styling. Truthfully, Sebastian’s fascination boggled her, just as much as his apparent embarrassment. “The town knows we’re together.” Sebastian tensed under her touch, prompting her to quickly add, “I’m saying that there’s certain assumptions people correctly make about a couple. That’s all I meant from ‘our personal experience.’”


For him, it meant privacy. “I get it.” She wrapped her arms around and over his shoulders, and brought her lips to his ear. “And I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

“Careful? So you weren’t even mildly embarrassed talking about it?”

“Not at all.” She held tighter, as a chilly wind passed. “Shameful, isn’t it?”

“Don’t say that. It’s just—it’s just the way you are.” He pressed his lips against her wrist. A strong wave crashed against the dock’s posts and splashed his shoes. Not that he seemed to mind. “I get it. You’re open and confident. I should be more like you.”

“I don’t recommend it.”

“I think so anyway. I thought so last year. Last year…” With his sharp breath, his tension melted away. “I think—I think Sam’s right. It was today, last year. I fell in love.”
Another wave crashed in. Kutone buried her face into the bunched fabric of Sebastian’s hood. Her eyes burned against the stymieing fabric.

“I thought it would pass,” Sebastian softly continued. “Thought it was just me thinking you a pretty novelty to stave off the boredom, but then I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I wanted to see you, talk to you, listen to you, as much as and as long as I could, because I never could get enough. Of you.”

*He’s been thinking about me for the longest time*… It was old news, but, there it was, that bubbling warmth in her chest that only Sebastian could start. It trickled into her stomach and buzzed against the walls. It sent quavers up her spine and flared through the roots of her hair. It beat her heart against her chest, against his back, searching for a way out of her body.

Most days, she choked the sensation, hoping for a better opportunity to say it, and mean it. But today, she couldn’t swallow it down. It spilled out of her voice, first in a whisper barely audible above the hush of the waves. “I love you.”

The sea quieted. Sebastian froze completely still, as Kutone breathed into his ear again. “Sebastian?”

“…Yeah?”

“I love you.” Saying the words filled her more with every repetition. Her body tingled, and her heart rang like a bell. “I really do.”

A grin laced his breathless voice. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I love you.”

He chuckled, though he tried muffling himself by planting his lips and nose on Kutone’s skin. “Well...” Gentle laughter shook him, as he then pressed a hand over his mouth. “Wow. I can’t—holy—I can’t stop smiling.”

She leaned forward, trying to catch a glimpse of Sebastian’s expression, but he turned his face away. “Show me,” Kutone urged. “You have the cutest smile.”

“Won’t. Holy—wow—I’m grinning like an idiot and I can’t make it stop!”

His contagious laughter soon had Kutone giggling too. Who knew vocalizing her feelings could fill her to bursting with—with what? Not joy. Not emotion. And “love” was too cheap in comparison to the richness overwhelming her then. It was like the glowing ocean, warmed by the summertime sun, filled her like a revitalizing elixir. Like the pulsing lights of the jellyfish became the new stars in her heart, their comfort lighting what were once darkened paths. Like the whole world had flipped around and peeled away its gray layers, and let the air both heat and cool the newly exposed flesh. She could kiss him, hug him, touch him, sleep with him as many times as she physically could, and she still wouldn’t be able to explain the infinite breadth of her emotions then.

This man, she thought, but stopped her thoughts there. This too, she needed to vocalize.

“Don’t ever stop smiling,” Kutone replied. “I promise I won’t humiliate you like that again.”

“I’ll man up too,” said Sebastian. “Don’t apologize.”

“Let me. You’re the greatest blessing of my life, Sebastian. So let me.”

For a moment, in the lull of Sebastian’s stammering reply, the drifting jellyfish seemed to twinkle
brighter. New stars in her sky.

She was empty no more.

Chapter End Notes

This was another case of *I had a direction planned in my notes and in my head, but then the characters took it in a completely different direction.* Not that that's any excuse for my uploading so late again.

But it's also been a hard week for me. Ack, I keep wanting to make excuses, I'm so sorry.

Thank you all, as always, for your continued support! Please keep sending me those hits, kudos, comments, bookmarks, and subscriptions into my inbox! I'm hitting another spell of burnout *and I absolutely cannot afford it here!* You can find me on tumblr too!
(these glimpses of us)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

One:

the sky’s a sieve, the land a catching bowl. rain patters down steps of clouds and dances on the roofs, before sliding down the lips of leaves and landing in neat splashing pirouettes on the ground. while the town watches its rivers swell and wash against raised banks, the farm’s summer-parched acres soak in the deluge, there’s almost no telling the difference between morning or afternoon, twilight or night, through the thick drizzling gray.

some lament the annual storms.

for one couple, the rain is respite and lullaby. an assurance of their safety.

the nightstand clock claims it’s morning. they struggle to wake up. their clothes ride up into wrinkles. bedhead kinks their hair into defiant angles. kicked-off blankets and sheets tangle around their limbs as they peel themselves off from each other. yet within minutes, as the autumn chill begins to blow away passing summer, they weave together again. they count down the minutes together, denying reality for as long as they possibly can.

“we should get up.”

in the absence of reality, they only have each other.

that is paradise indeed.

Two:

a whiny dog finally forces her awake. she leaves her lover to waken on his own, and drags herself out into the living room. she lights and stokes a fire in the hearth. she keeps the tv off—today is a day for the sound of crackling fire and hushing rain—and pauses a while in front of the fireplace.

he’s been with her for four consecutive nights, making this the fifth morning in a row they’ve woken up together. strange to think about as a fact, when the rightness of his being here rang a more intuitive cord within her. facts brings perspective, she thinks. he’s been living with her five days and he’s yet to show exhaustion or complacency. an unvoiced, unacknowledged part of her believes he’ll never show them either.

her dog nudges his head against her arm. wags his tail and pants as the firelight illuminates his golden coat. he keens another whimper for breakfast and dances toward the kitchen. claws clicking on the floor, he rounds back to his master. whimpers again. dances back.

her lover chuckles from the bedroom doorway. he’s brushed his hair down and already washed his face, but neither do much to wipe his habitually saturnine expression. melancholy can still smile. he proves it with the slight upturn at the corner of his lip.

“hey.”
she stands from her crouch in front of the fire, and meets him at the doorway. she’s an unbrushed, unwashed mess compared to him, but she returns his smile as he hugs her close.

“hey.”

Three:

the retriever munches his morning kibble and laps water from his dish. every so often, he lifts his head and watches the backs of his masters as they lean over the kitchen counter. they’re washing blueberries.

--sam messaged me. lewis got the bus running again.

--lewis? did he now?

--you doubt it too?

--too?

she pops a blueberry into her mouth at the same time he turns and stares her down.

--it was a rustbucket. no one could have fixed it up in one night in this weather.

she adds a few more blueberries to her mouth. the dog half-abandons his breakfast, and wags his tail for his master’s attention. he loves playing catch, especially if the thing he needs to catch is round. even more so when the round thing smells like a sweet and juicy treat.

she catches the wistful stare, and relents with a sigh. turning around, she holds a blueberry aloft. the dog paces backward, bunching his back legs underneath for a jump. she chucks the berry. oki leaps.

the blueberry bounces off the dog’s nose and rolls into the living room. he chases after his treat.

--you have a theory?

--a wizard gave me an earring that stops me from freezing you to death. why wouldn’t i have a theory?

chewing and swallowing down his treat, the dog plods back into the kitchen. he sees the next berry in his master’s hand, and wags his tail again.

she laughs.

--oki, you’ve got to catch it this time.

she tosses the berry high. oki leaps again.

it bounces off his forehead and rolls into the kitchen. his other, new master chuckles.

--he’s kinda bad at this, isn’t he?

--only blueberries. here, you try.

he takes the handful of blueberries. he holds one aloft, letting the retriever sight the fruit, then tosses it toward the dog’s face.
the dog snaps the berry out of the air. his master laughs and applauds and praises him. it feels good.

his other master tosses another blueberry, which the dog happily snatches mid-air again.

--you’re not going to answer me, are you?

--only because there’s not much to talk about. your theory holds and pam has her job back. that’s all that matters, isn’t it?

Four:

he’s on his laptop. the dog naps next to him on the sofa. his head hurts and he needs another coffee. he slams his laptop, displaying an in-progress brag sheet and a not-yet-finalized portfolio, closed.

there’s a touch on his shoulder.

--here.

a coffee mug in his hands.

--you looked like you needed one.

she likes the smell of coffee on him. likes tasting the bitter smokiness in his kisses. he happily trades tobacco for caffeine, if only for her sake. besides, the coffees come in package deals that include her touch, her smile, her voice, her presence next to him. her kisses on his cheek and her fingers woven with his.

he stretches this break for as long as he possibly can.

Five:

another frustrating lull stalls his work. the words aren’t coming out, the formatting isn’t working. the part of him that knows how to fix this frustration isn’t answering its call to duty.

she isn’t here to save him this time. she’s in the kitchen. if he looks just above the laptop’s screen, he sees her profile at the stove. she leans over to peer into a pot on the back burners. she stirs once and without looking, turns the knobs for the gas. she turns away for one deft second to gather something from the counter. her motion’s smooth as she dumps ingredients into pots and pans. she never breaks a panicked sweat.

the sweet scent of blueberries, grapes, and honey perfumes the air, while the savory aroma of sage and roasting vegetables swirls beneath it. the glassy clinks of preserve jars, the ceramic clatter of dishware and silverware. this late-afternoon vision of her, still in her pajamas and her hair tied but still a mess, working hard in the kitchen—all facets of a possible future.

yet this image isn’t quite complete. he sets his laptop on a side table and stands from his seat on the sofa. he stretches, and pads across the living room. as he enters the kitchen, he touches her shoulder.

--i can help. what should i do?

these images of her, he decides, are no longer complete without him next to her.
Six:

they’re enjoying dinner together, when, during a pause in their conversation, he stops. he wonders about this path he’s trying to take, versus this idyllic image of him now. or rather, he wonders about all paths leading into his future. he wonders if each possible permutation leads to the same will-be. he wonders what’s beyond even the boundaries of his own musings.

he rolls asparagus across his plate, into a wall of mashed potatoes.

--have you ever thought about kids, kutone?

it’s a question she can answer however she pleases. she deals with the town’s youngsters well enough, but he’s never heard her voice a desire to have any—have a family—of her own.

he directs the question at himself as well. he’s never thought about kids, until this moment as they sit across from each other at the table, when he realizes they worked together on this dinner and have done so for the past few days. this moment, as contentment rolls over in his chest, he remembers not only her profile in the kitchen, but also the sharpened focus of her eyes when she read through his drafts. he remembers the reflections and silhouettes of raindrops sliding down the glass pane, shifting into a shimmering mosaic with the words across the pages of her open book.

this moment, when the hush of the evening rain echoes back her whispered i love you into his thoughts, and he finds himself biting his lip to control his grin.

it’s not that he wants kids with her.

it’s more like, he wonders where these whispers and these feelings will ultimately take them. he wonders if she’s thinking about the same thing: where will we go?

she stops as well, fork hovering over her plate. thoughtfulness flickers across her features, before she puts her fork down and rests her elbow on the table. she cups her chin in her palm, and cracks a testing grin.

--have you ever thought about marrying me, sebastian?

Chapter End Notes

So. I need another break.

It might seem dumb of me to do this when we're so close to the end, but that's exactly why I need to chill out for a bit. I've outlined these last chapters. I know what's in them. I just have to write them.

And, for all of you amazing readers, I want to make them good.

So I'm asking for two weeks guys! Just two weeks, and starting from the third week, June 22nd, we're going toward finishing this fic.

Thanks so much for your patience and understanding, my dudes. Keep commenting, keep hitting that kudos button, keep subscribing, because that feedback will help me
bounce back that much better! You can find me at my tumblr too! I'll answer your asks and chat even while I'm taking a break from this fic.

See you June 22nd then!
Distant Notes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On a clear autumn evening, around the time the annual rains finally let up, a shell-shocked Kutone sat cross-legged in front of a fully functional aquarium. Fish of the valley swam to and fro inside the tank, unblinking eyes flicking back forth, and firelight glinting off their sinewy scales. A fresh, oaken scent wafted up from the polished floorboards beneath her, plush carpet cushioning her underneath. To think, this was the banquet hall of what was once a run-down community center. The wooden walls and stout beams practically sparkled, and the Junimos had even magicked up a filter for the aquarium, humming and bubbling the tank’s crystal-clear water.

Kutone cradled her head between her hands.

A lot of things, she realized, about the fully restored community center was hard for her to swallow. With each section of the center coming back to life piecewise, she should have been used to the concept by the time she found herself sitting on the floor. Yet, surreality hung her in a limbo between tormented unknowing, and unburdened understanding. The kitchen—the same kitchen she’d climbed up to reach the rafters—had working burners, running water, and a clean, cool fridge. Foragables from around the valley, along with crops and goods from Breezy Banks fully stocked the pantry, enough to feed a grand gathering. The crafts room—the very first room which once contained the Junimos’ message—had full bookshelves, an arts corner with paints and an easel, a wide table with children’s block toys, and even a spinning wheel with wool and threads ready for sewing and weaving.

But more than any shiny feature of the building, it was the silence that thrust a new kind of emptiness into Kutone’s chest. A blazing fire crackled in the hearth, its mantle adorned with a tapestry of six stars in a ring. The wind had ceased its moan through the gaps—there were no gaps left for that melancholic whine. Neither dust or cobwebs clouded the air, and though night cast its dark veil outside, an ethereal brightness glimmered inside the community center.

She eyed the farthest corner of the main hall, leaf-and-stone hut gone without a trace. Not even a lingering memory of it remained, a pristine sofa in its place, along with a coffee table, and a case of books. Kutone couldn’t care less what titles the case contained.

She could hear the last peals of their voices fading away: *Gud-bai! Gud-bai, Kutone!*

They sure knew how to keep their farewells simple. It was a proper end to their shuffling along the beams, their curious pressure, their bouncy dances and elated chirps whenever Kutone brought them a new bundle of treasures. Simple enough the silence could no longer echo their voices.

Would she be so strange to admit she’d felt a funny kind of kinship with the Junimos? Probably.

From a distant someplace, or perhaps from a fading memory, wind chimes sang in celebratory tones.

A week passed, before a huff-puffing Mayor Lewis scrambled onto the Banks. Kutone had never seen the mayor with so much color under the sweeping brush of his mustache. The sprightly codger had apparently run back and forth across town to spread the news: *someone’s restored the community center!*
On Kutone’s doorstep, however, as she hid a small bowl of milk, fairy rose honey, and cinnamon behind the sweeping fronds of an outdoor planter, Mayor Lewis changed his tune. “Was it you, Kutone? Did you restore that old community center?”

She choked on a laugh, replying, “That’s not a building one woman could restore on her own.” Sebastian shifted uneasily at the door, likely steeling himself to interrogate her later. “Besides, I’ve had this place to look after too.”

Lewis coughed. “Somehow, I believe you’re being modest. Gus, Emily, and Demetrius all received packages from you, filled with goods they once requested at the bulletin! And that was quite a few years ago, you understand.”

“Strange that someone’s using my name then,” Kutone half-lied. She’d hoped the Junimos would leave some things to mystery, but they apparently wanted her to take the glory.

“You are being modest. This town’s been flourishing since you arrived! So, I have decided, as mayor, to recognize your efforts at the center’s grand re-opening!”

“Lewis…”

“Now, now, young lady!” Lewis crossed his arms. His stern gaze followed Kutone as she stood up from her crouch and leaned against her doorframe. “I didn’t leave you much room for choice. I put in a rush order for your commemorative trophy as soon as I saw that beautiful building.”

“A trophy?”

“Befitting for a hero!”

While Lewis apparently chose to remain oblivious to Kutone’s baffled grimace, Sebastian snickered. He pressed his hand on her shoulder. “I’ll make sure she’s there to receive it.”

Lewis’s bristles crinkled up as he grinned. “Leave it to young love,” he replied. “I’m thankful you’re supporting her, Sebastian. Far too hard on herself, isn’t she?”

“We’re working on it.”

After Lewis pottered away and Sebastian closed the door, Kutone, scowling, put her hands on her hips. “A trophy,” she said. “I never said I wanted recognition.”

“Meaning someone has to give it you.” Sebastian was the very picture of placidity, albeit somewhat triumphant in the slight smirk of his features. Like he knew he’d already won this argument, and was relishing Kutone’s flustered reaction. “Since you sometimes won’t take it from me, might as well have the entire community in on it, right?”

As he brushed past her back to his laptop, Kutone whirled in place. “You didn’t put the idea in his head, did you?”

“If I did, what would you do? Break up with me? Sorry to say, I’m moving out the valley toward the end of autumn, so, the heartbreak wouldn’t hurt too bad.”

He chuckled again at Kutone’s miffed expression. “You know how you’re decently nice with everyone here?”

“What does that have to do with—?”
“Other people want to do the same thing to you, Kutone. Even I get that. So it can’t be that hard for you to understand, right?”

It wasn’t. Understanding things was lately a whole lot easier.

Lewis had slated the event for the early evening, at a decent dinnertime hour—Gus wanted to take the center’s kitchen and pantry for an inaugural spin, and had already planned a celebratory menu for the occasion. By the time Kutone and Sebastian made it to the building, façade festooned with paper garlands, colorful balloons, and a red ribbon already severed at the doors, the Pelican Town community center was basically a party hall. Townspeople meandered inside, flitting from the fireplace to the aquarium, the mayor’s office to the center’s main dining area at the kitchen. They’d somehow wheeled over the jukebox from the Stardrop Saloon, filling the building with homely music while the town kids chased each other through the corridors, and the adults drank, ate, and danced.

The town’s old-timers made a point of approaching Kutone, giving her hearty handshakes and sage “Thank you”s on behalf of everyone else. Kutone was resigned to her fate, accepting the tidal wave of gratitude sweeping her from every direction. On her part, the sound of collective camaraderie dulled the stinging silence of friends long gone. She grudgingly appreciated the attention.

Sam and Abigail, both determined to find the secret to the community center’s restoration, had pulled Sebastian away to explore the boiler room. Secrets are always downstairs, said their RPG experience. There had to be clues in that otherwise innocuous boiler room. And while Sebastian had seemed loathe to leave Kutone’s side, he agreed his friends might need a chaperone.

Kutone watched them leave, internally correcting them—the secret to the community center was nowhere in the building. She gazed up at the rafters, wondering, if the Junimos had sealed that old crawlspace as well. Maybe not, she hoped, from the faint hum of wind chimes that might or might not be her memories filling in the gaps. Maybe she could take their favorite snack to them sometime, if they kept that room open.

“Sturdy beams, those.” An awkward lumbering presence snuffled next to Kutone. “They’ll hold up for a while yet. Years, perhaps. Many long, long years.”

She turned, finding a sweaty Morris staring at the ceiling with her. Spectacles clouded and bowtie hanging at a skewed angle, he seemed to have a hard time drinking even the glass of water in his clammy hand. He really looked pitiful. “How are you, Morris?” said Kutone.

“You ask that knowing I’m not well,” Morris snapped, “knowing this occasion is nothing but a stressor to me, a downright mockery of me—you know it!” With a trembling hand, he pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his face. “So this was it the entire time, was it?”

“What was it?”

“Oh please.” The water in Morris’s glass rippled as he shook. Rage, Kutone presumed. “I kept quiet on your behalf, Miss Merchandise Assistant, because I thought I understood the way of country bumpkins. A certain detachment from reality makes those buffoons so… infuriatingly ideal. You wanted that for yourself.”

“You’re talking like I had a plan.”

A nasty twitch creased Morris’s features into a barely-human scowl. “I put the pieces together, Miss
Kutone. A fall from grace, a sudden resignation. You come out here, your old boss comes too, and after he leaves me the worst review in the history of reviews, you convince him to resign as well, leaving an abyssal vacuum you knew corporate would have a hard time filling.”

“Look, whatever Rhei chose to do is on him. I honestly wanted nothing to do with him.”

“Ha! You really do call him by his first name, eh? But what do I care about some old flame?” Morris swept an arm to indicate the building. “This was supposed to have been a new warehouse! With business gaining steam here, a warehouse in Pelican Town would have been conducive to everything! New products, new jobs, new income, and, ultimately, new residents! We could have expanded this community into a new city, and then, you! You!”

She couldn’t deny she felt a little sorry for Morris. He was just doing his job as part of the machine. But Morris’s tirade went on, oblivious to the complete zen of Kutone’s features. “Young was a powerful, powerful asset. Talented! A role model for all of us at the retail management level! Imagine having to fill in that gap, as a businessperson! Imagine having to be me trying to satisfy a turbulent corporate reeling from the loss of one of its greatest pillars, trying to bring one good thing to them in their trying time! Imagine being me, knowing the wrench in the community expansion plan was some whorish turncoat from their offices, and wanting nothing more than to get. You. Out!!”

By this time, townspeople catching a wind of the confrontation were turning to Kutone and Morris. The Trio had already crept back from the boiler room, and Yoba Above, Sebastian’s expression could have frozen the lava caverns at least three times over. Noting his clenched fists, Kutone gave a slight shake of her head, mouthing a stern No.

“One thing!” Morris hissed, jabbing one finger into the air. “I only asked for one good thing for the business, and you gave me the exact opposite!”

“Tell me something,” Kutone finally replied. “You love your company, right?”

“Excuse me? The providers of my house, my food, my clothes, with opportunity for advancement and paid benefits and insurance and retirement?”

“How strange, this complete lack of emotion regarding her old company, this new ability to see the situation so objectively. “But at the same time, I’m not sure Joja’s vision is the community Pelican Town wants.”

An agreeing murmur rippled through the crowd, followed by a sharp, “It isn’t.” Then Pierre, taking off his glasses and handing them to Caroline, stood, arms crossed, next to Kutone. “Now I’m not blaming you completely, Morris,” he said. “And I will admit I was bitter about the competition. But Pelican Town was always about living off the valley, and helping each other out. We forgot that spirit, because of the convenience your company and products provide!”

“So you would rather be stuck in the dark ages?” Morris spluttered. “I know you, I know the human spirit of progression! You’re all for less spending and a better QoL! Look, how about—how about a compromise? I can—I can narrow my repertoire down to only the things that would be most difficult for you to bring in, Pierre! I’ll make the Mart into a smaller convenience store! Your membership benefits would still apply!”

Demetrius snorted next. “So you’d still be asking to pollute our air, water, earth, and spirits with your company’s waste product?”
“Oh can it, would you? I’m sure Joja has some type of eco-friendly option, but I doubt our footprint in Pelican Town is hardly large enough for you to care about!”

“There is no environmental protection statute for the company,” Kutone responded, and shrugged at Morris’s murderous glare. “I’m sure logistics change often for a company as big as Joja, but its core value of affordability won’t. There tends to be collateral for cheap product.”

Nostrils flaring and shoulders heaving, Morris growled, spat into his water, and before anyone could stop him, splashed his entire glass into Kutone’s face. She cringed at the gob of stickiness sliding down her face and froze, stricken.

Victory cranked up Morris’s Joja Sneer, at least until his entire body twisted into bafflement when Pierre’s fist slammed into his face, and Sebastian, that iciness to his eyes unlike anything anyone—except Abigail, Alex, and Kutone—had ever seen, drove his heel straight into the small of Morris’s back.

The ensuing clamor was lost on Kutone.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, now hold on!

Glass thrown. Glass shattering.

Another jaw-cracking thud. What’s that? An extra-large knuckle sandwich with a side of mean right hook? Coming right up!

Yoba Above, Sebastian, heel! Heel!

Holy shit, Dad, stop, Morris’s out!

A towel over her head, a corner of the cloth scrubbing off that slimy feeling from her cheek. Dearie me, men are just so petty, aren’t they?

Mayor Lewis wrenched Pierre off of whaling on Morris. “This is not,” he wheezed, “how the evening was supposed to go!”

Later that evening, after Doctor Harvey checked Morris in to the town clinic, after the excitement settled down and the townspeople left the building, promising to properly celebrate the new community center the next day, Kutone sat on an old stone bench, towel still over her head. Next to her, Sebastian had re-oriented his breath, but held his head between his hands.

“Sebby?” Kutone ventured, “You okay?”

He sat up with a sharp breath, and stared with wide, alert eyes. Icy, thought Kutone, just like the air around him. “Yeah,” he murmured. “I’m fine. Just…”

“Pissed.”

“Extremely. Irrationally.” He clenched his fists, then slowly unwound them. “How petty was he?!”

She rubbed her hand up and down Sebastian’s arm. “He had his own problems to deal with too, y’know. I agree I haven’t made life very easy for him this past year.”

“Still!” Agitation brought out a nervous bounce of his leg, that no amount of gripping his knee could stop. “Shit!”
She drew her touch up, brushing a finger against his cold cheek before stroking his earring. “Is this thing really working, I wonder…”

“Now’s really not the time to worry about that.”

“I’d say it is. Spit-water’s gross on the skin, but nothing hot water and soap can’t handle. I might smell like apple cucumber blossom though.”

“Apple…?” Sebastian finally deflated, laughing. “You really don’t let anything get to you.”

Kutone shrugged. “I’ve learned to let a lot of things go.” She tapped her cheek. “But help me out here, Sebastian! Please replace this gross feeling with something nicer!”

“Fine, but on the other side, alright?”

She mocked a pout, but smiled at the ticklish flutter of Sebastian’s lips on her cheek. “Fair enough,” she replied. “Now answer me. Are you sure you’re okay?”

He sighed once and slouched back against the bench. “Yeah,” he said again. “I’m fine. I know why you’re worried.” He closed his eyes, and sighed again. “But I’m really okay this time.”

He wasn’t lying. Though his skin was like ice and his breath frosty, Sebastian was at ease. Kutone combed her fingers through his hair. “How gallant of you,” she said, “but dumb. And unnecessary.”

“Are you shaming me for getting offended on your behalf?”

“Oh, no. I appreciate it.” As Sebastian opened his eyes, Kutone leaned forward, planting a kiss on his lips. The last remnants of his tension melted away. “Thank you, Sebastian.”

He said nothing else, though he shrugged in response.

A dry autumn breeze rustled through. With it, came the distant song of wind chimes. Prayer chimes. Sebastian smiled at the sound. “Whatever you did,” he said, “thanks for not taking those out.”

“The chimes?”

“Local legend. The invisible wind chimes you can hear but can never see. I always thought they were somewhere in the roofspace.”

Kutone turned a wistful gaze up to the community center’s roof area. Spying a small window with no glass pane or light inside, she smiled. “They are,” she replied, earning Sebastian’s bewildered stare. “They’re wind chimes my grandfather put up in the community center’s attic.”

Sebastian sat up again. “This building has an attic?”

“Secretly. There’s a crawlspace up in the rafters of the main lobby. You follow it up to a room at the very top of the community center.” She closed her eyes, hoping and imagining the room was the same as she’d last seen it. “There’s a little shrine there. The wind chimes are the centerpiece, and there’s seasonal offerings to the harvest sprites on the altar. Although, I guess, since my grandfather passed, the sprites use it as their personal shrine to him.”

The chimes sang softly, like an affirmation of Kutone’s theory.

Sebastian followed Kutone’s gaze, to the open, unlit window. He spoke in a low tone, to keep from speaking over the chimes’ tones. “Didn’t the wizard say at one point, that you had a contract, or
something like that?”

“He did.”

“And? Was it true? Is that the secret to the community center? The ‘harvest sprites’ you keep talking about, this shrine to your grandpa, the wind chimes that I thought, until now, were just an urban legend—you really had some kind of contract that helped you restore the community center.”

“At least you don’t sound like you think I’m crazy.”

“I’ve gotten pretty good at hiding my thoughts.”

“Hey…”

“I’m kidding.” Sebastian pulled down the towel draping over Kutone, until it bunched around her neck like a scarf. “I apparently have ice powers that are extremely reactive to my emotional stability, so, no, some magical contract you might have with an entity I’ve never seen—it isn’t the craziest thing here.”

Kutone stood up from the bench, and grasped Sebastian’s hand to pull him upright. “It’s a contract long terminated, anyway.” As Sebastian gripped tighter, warmth flared anew in his palm. The wizard’s earring really was working, after all. “Soon as I brought them their last commission, they poofed away and left behind a sparkling brand-new community center. And a fully operational greenhouse on the Banks.”

“So my mother didn’t sneak in repairs…”

They started walking away from the building, cutting across the courtyard and passing the running fountain. But strangely, no matter the distance between them and the community center, the chimes still hummed their sonorous notes. Maybe they were just remembering its sound, and it lived still in their ears. Or the new room happened to be the perfect echo chamber, like a belltower. Kutone and Sebastian stopped together, looking back over their shoulders, toward the roof of the community center.

“Why did your grandfather leave wind chimes in this place?”

The image of Mom’s old Pa-Pa, knees tucked under himself, white beard crinkled against his chest, head bowed and palms pressed in prayer, glowed like candlelight in Kutone’s mind. I leave a prayer here. He felt so real in her thoughts then, seemed so tangible. But she shook her head. “I’ve thought about asking my mother,” she replied. “It’s worth a shot, but, a part of me knows she has no idea.”

“Instinct?”

“Yeah.”

The chimes tinkled again, their sounds reminding Kutone of the smooth wooden clapper surrounded by polished metal rods. She could almost see it, just as tangibly as her image of Grandpa.

Kuu-chan, sang the wind chimes. Kuu-chan, do you hear me?

She caught her oncoming outburst into a knot in her throat. Kuu-chan, her childhood nickname. She’d forgotten it even existed.

Ah, Kuu-chan, it is so nice to see you so happy and well! I am proud of you!
“Proud of…?”

Look! Oh look at you! You have your smile back! You have love in your heart, kindness in your voice!

Sebastian gently shook her. “Kutone?”

I can see it all from beyond the river, Kuu-chan. I have been praying here on these banks for you! And my prayers truly reached you and the valley, I can see it!

Kutone pressed her free hand over her trembling lip. Eyes wet and tingling, she shook her head, even as an alarmed Sebastian pulled her against him. “It’s nothing,” she said. “I’m fine.”

“Hey, Kutone… Talk to me.” Releasing Kutone’s hand, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, allowing Kutone to hide her teary face. He pressed a kiss into her hair. “Is it the whole Morris thing?”

She shook her head again. “Nothing to do with him,” she said.

“Then…?”

She lifted her tear-stained features. “A lot of good things.”

My child, I am so happy to hear it. I will keep praying for you, no matter where I am.

Kutone craned her head up, and kissed a bewildered Sebastian. “The chimes just reminded me,” she said, pausing for another kiss, “of so many good things.”

I will always watch over you, my child.

“I think that’s why Grandpa put them up there.”

I will always be so, so proud of you.

“It’s a reminder, for everyone, of everything so good in our lives.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I am aware that poor Morris and Joja haven't had as much of a role throughout the story, to warrant the scenes in this chapter. In my head, fixing that requires going back to past chapters and adding more content, which honestly, I don't have the patience to do. I want to finish this fic before I start nit-picking it, so this is me, asking for your understanding on the fact this fic is a one-man project, and is kind of a rough second or third draft.

If you still want to yell at me though, feel free to leave comments! Kudos work too, as well as subscriptions. Oh, and my tumblr is totally open too. You should follow it, so you can see bonus content I'm starting to post there.

Also, also! Pi's done it again, folks! Isn't Kutone just so pretty??! Thanks so much!!

Oh and btw, hi I'm back.
Mermaid Queen

Chapter Notes

Someone just get this chapter away from me I am so done with it. I tried, I really did try, but I'm apologizing in advance for my lacking ability to pull off the thing I wanted to do.

You can continue yelling at me at my tumblr if you'd like! I have a WIP page up now so you can see what else I have coming up!

And also in advance, thank you so much for your patience, kudos, comments, bookmarks, and even those little hits! Every bit of support you send my way keeps my remaining sanity intact.

A pre-hair-gel Sam draped himself over the edge of an open bus window. Incredulity sparked in his bright blue eyes, wide like his dropped jaw, as he stared down at his best friend sitting on his motorcycle, girlfriend clambering on behind him. “What do you mean you’re not taking the bus with us?” Sam spluttered. “That’s the whole point of a gig, isn’t it? The tour bus and all the stupid shit we could do together on the way there!”

Sebastian turned the ignition of the bike, and snickered. “We’re not exactly on-tour,” he said. “And they need someone from each number to do equipment checks before the event. So I’m heading out earlier than the rest of you.”

Sam leaned further, and jabbed a finger in Kutone’s direction. “Then she stays and enjoys the not-on-tour bus with us! You can go check whatever you want on your own!”

“And this is where I play the ‘devoted boyfriend’ card and tell you she stays with me.”

“But that’s our lucky star, Seb! Our unofficially-official manager! We need her for like, pep talks and a briefing on the venue!”

“I need her too,” Sebastian replied. As Kutone put in her earplugs and adjusted her goggles, he released the kickstand and began, to Sam’s stricken disbelief, cruising away. Ignoring Sam’s futile cries, Sebastian spoke over his shoulder. “I called dibs on you first, anyway. Meaning I get priority, right?”

“I appreciate your boldness,” Kutone replied, laying a pat on Sebastian’s side. “It saves us some time, so come on! We have a hotel to check in to and a venue to review!”

Zuzu University’s Annual Block Party was not only a mouthful of words, but also a sizable bucket of bitter nostalgia for Kutone. Set-up had started far earlier in the day, with food trucks rolling in and lining up along the campus’s central lawn, crews and cranes stacking and screwing stage beams and lights into place for the evening. The smooth concrete of the lawn’s pathways still squeaked under her sneakers, and the sun still beat too heavily on this one part of the campus. College students milled around the set-up on their way to the next classes, as the clock tower tolled a new morning hour.

Pelican Town’s “Rogue P.G.” (no caps or punctuation, Sam emphasized) was slated to perform at
the block party’s “Indie Hub,” located in a corner close to the entrance of event. Getting to the stage required negotiating steps and crossing another small lawn bordered with hedges, but the lights would more than make up for the trek.

hi we’re roguepg, from pelican town?

we have a story to tell, from us to you, about a boy, a queen, and a city under the sea.

(from him to her, a love song)

kid’s a beach denizen, the sea his safe reside. he offers gifts to that benevolent water, in shells and rice grains and stones divine. his prayers over mother’s abalone rosary ask for safe storms, keep that sick mother sound above the tide, and for a while, the sea did abide.

but not even Neptune nor his fair bride could align, the moods of sea tempest, despite kid’s sincere cry. yet the sea that day took not sweet mama, but loyal kid, abalone diving, in his rags and tags and sun-burnt sag, gray and windy and whipping back and forth, the sea slammed kid down maelstrom’s throat.

he supposed himself gone, devoured and drowned and gone from one and all, til the silvery scales of queen Neptune did wrap him in solace and peace, eye of that grand storm. her touch silk and feather yet slime and shine, her embrace revitalizes yet suffocates at the same time.

down, down she took him, away from the churn of tempest, until, at that deepest crook of the world’s darkest trench, the Abyssal Palace lit her way.

kid’s prayers had fallen on listening ears, clear from gratitude Neptune unto him deals. the gift of breath under the sea, the blessing of ocean’s abyssal light, kid becomes the prince of Silver Queen’s dreams. the palace retainers remember, the gifts they each received: one of a chipped bowl, another of a fishing pole, one of rice grains on the surface, yet another of market’s dried fruits and seeds—all shared and received, and they all realized, they loved thee!

except for the witch, snake witch in her ochre and black stripes, hooded with rotten kelp and needle teeth caked in stale krill—the queen’s beauty, she laments, is but a reflection of the ugliness she hides inside! The secret, she cries, lies in Her forbidden box, scarlet like blood, trimmed gold like the sun—inside, screams the witch to terrified kid, is the black heart of a usurper queen, Neptune must be beholden to the inky darkness of that which he holds so pristine!

and kid wonders. wonders about the true form of liquid silver, wonders about white and black pearls in a queen’s coral crown, wonders about his sweet sick mama back home, wonders about becoming a prince of the abyss—surely this is a trick!

the witch’s spines rattle, her kelp hood writhes—not all that is benevolent exists so for your sake, she is using you as the love she can never have, her devotion to Neptune unlike anything true! for the witch’s cold abyss heart flares alive for only her golden king, surely, that is dear love that must be made clear!

Steal the treasure box, human sea prince. Open its walls of deception and rust-colored shame, reveal that Silver Queen for the ugly beast she truly is!

and when deepest night obscures the abyss in noctis so thick, to the treasure room kid prince does sneak. this is a crusade, an unraveling of lies, an unmasking of persona, a holy mission to restore sanctity to the orichalcum walls of the Abyssal Palace. and perhaps, to bring true love to the surface
where it belongs—perhaps, a disrobing of an ugly skin, to reveal the shine and facets of a true beauty within.

he steals the treasure box. he trips the alarms. jets of bubbles and sharpened fishbone blast him, pierce him, as he runs for his honor and life to the throne room of Neptune—

And there the Silver Queen waits, her radiance both from the bulbs glowing in her white hair, and from the shine of the scales down her body, her voice a melody even in the bubbling muffle of the sea floor:

--is that my heart you hold, my dear prince?

kid hugs the box to his chest—he’s going back to the surface, after he reveals the inside; be prepared true witch of the sea! I will reveal your treachery yet! Return me to my mother and expect gifts nevermore—I spurn ye in the name of truth and goodwill!

her silvery coils gather on her throne. the abyssal current wavers through her white hair, glowing, divine, like her coral diadem, like her unseeing inky eyes, like the scales across her body—she is radiance and holiness, the true love of benevolent Neptune.

--from love i do forgive thee.

yet kid must see the proof.

a witch looks on, as kid jams his pry bar against the lock. the box creaks open, stirring even golden Neptune to the throne room, stirring the palace retainers as audience.

inside is a dull, green-gray abalone, bristles writhing and sticky foot stuck to the bottom of the box and unyielding to any grip. Neptune turns, bewildered at the sight, to the wife he considered beautiful. The snake witch bares her needle teeth, krill escaping from her victorious sneer.

--look! look how ugly it is! That is your queen’s heart, divine sea king! hard and ugly and unyielding to love or gentleness! go on boy, rip it out, let that gangrenous flesh bleed, let it rot as it should!

kid looks at the flat edge of his pry bar. the queen’s heart is abalone, just like the catch off the reef near his seaside shack.

The queen’s heart is abalone. Underneath the hard shell is the softest flesh, flesh that will bleed dry if he rips this heart out.

The queen’s heart is abalone. It stands against crash and pull, ebb and flow, of cold tide and roaring rain.

The queen’s heart is abalone, mother-of-pearl.

The queen’s heart, is the most beautiful, most invisible heart of all.

kid closes the box. puts it on the ground. fishes his pocket for his greatest treasure, that rosary of shards dear mother wove as his ward, his own mother-of-pearl. Abyssal light shines against nacre glow, washes the orichalcum walls in waves of radiant rainbow.

--these, he shouts, are pieces of a queen’s heart!

the light blinds the witch. she writhes and kicks. screams and clicks. binds her eyes with kelp and ink twofold, and rushes out into the abyss, the one true friend without which she’d be remiss.
silver tears ripple with the walls’ nacre sheen, as divine Neptune embraces his queen.

--you, my dear prince, are my greatest blessing indeed.

Kutone herself had never hung out at the Indie Hub during her time as a student, but standing in the crowd then, she wondered what other small bands she’d missed out on by neglecting this stage. Even more than that, though, she was grateful to have the chance now to make up. Sam on strings, switching between bass and guitar, Abigail on percussion, and Sebastian on keyboard, were made an earlier number in the lineup, but they didn’t disappoint. As the Block Party came alive with the night, so did the crowd gathering and cheering and dancing to roguepg’s out-of-this-world beats and melody. Kutone had long lost the rest of the town residents in the crowd, but if the comments were anything to go by…

*Can you believe they’re from the boonies?*

*The girl on drums is a woman after my heart…*

*Dude do they have a soundsky or bandcabin, I need these tunes!*

*Lead’s super rad too—bassline and guitar solo?*

*You think the boy on the keyboard is a student here…?*

*RougePG for the win! Encore! Encore!*

Fans already? And enough that when they finished and the MC announced a meet-and-greet with the Trio while the next band set up, a rousing cheer rose from the audience. From her place a fair distance from the stage, Kutone could almost see Sebastian go wan, as he shot a desperate, pleading look to Sam’s back.

Sam of course, was not telepathic, and neither did he have eyes on the back of his head. As the charismatic leader, he shouted “Thank you”s and “See you there”s into the mic, and waved the crowd to the designated area. Abigail practically skipped away with Sam, leaving Sebastian to heave a sigh and drag himself toward the VIP box.

Kutone, laughing, pulled out her phone.

>>dont worry about it, ok? the performance was amazing, and you three deserve all the fans youre getting rn.

Sebastian, descending the steps stage right, paused once to cast a worried look on his phone. He glanced across the audience, shook his head, and texted back,

>>i was kinda looking forward to this date though…

Kutone shoved one hand into her pocket, while the other tapped back her response.

>>like i said, dont worry about it! luckily, nights are long out here in the city.

>>ill be nearby.

>>where?

She turned her back on the venue, and walked away. At this time, especially with this gathering, downtown university would begin awakening to synthetic beats and moving bodies, to beer pitchers
and cocktail glasses at the bar. One party, after all, never had enough fun to sate the students’ starvation for life. They flitted from one venue to the next, making pit stops at food trucks for smoked sausages and thick juicy tacos, or, the beer garden sectioned off in a central, quiet spot away from the dancing, music-blasting campus. And it was because it was this time, when party vibes were really starting to pick up, that Kutone’s nostalgia turned her toward the block party’s entrance, down the sidewalk, and into the off-campus university plaza.

To a bar.

After texting the location to Sebastian, she stared up at the neon sign, and snickered still at the name of the place: Beats ‘n Things. A dismissive name for a bar and lounge that mixed great drinks with buttery beats.

She opened the door and crept inside. Same dim lighting. Same lounge sofas and high tables and bar stools surrounded a dance floor. Same pump and rhythm pulsing through the hall.

Same ol’ “Beats” who cracked a brilliant grin as Kutone slid into a seat at the bar. He was a roundish and roguish fellow, though his neat cowlick and trimmed beard also gave him the air of a barista. “Look who’s back from the dead,” he said, already setting a tall glass on the countertop. In went ice, a crystalline tequila, bright orange juice, and a slow settle of grenadine. “A sunrise for the occasion?”

Kutone snorted. “Smooth as ever, Beats. But you’re not making me pay for this, are you?”

“Says the newly-famous vintner of Stardew Valley!”

She eyed him over the rim of her drink, waiting before she took her sip.

Beats threw his hands up, simultaneously tossing a hand towel over his shoulder. “Snake Eyes are still going strong, I see. On the house then, for an old patron.”

Snake Eyes. Another old name she remembered hearing from a past life. Jaci had coined it, for Kutone’s testing, sideways glare. Kutone raised her glass. “Cheers, Beats.”

The bartender tipped a salute and shuffled away to top off another patron’s glass, still talking with Kutone as he passed. “So what made you come out for the block party this year?”

She traced circles along the clouded surface of her glass, before she took another sip. “Supporting a little start-up over at Indie Hub.” Leaning her head against her knuckles, Kutone flashed an amiable smile, the tequila already warming her insides. “You could hear them from here, right?”

“Get this,” Beats snorted, “Things actually left the place to listen to one of them. Some kid group from the boonies? That synth got the Things Seal of Approval!”

“Awww,” Kutone replied, beaming with pride as other patrons murmured and cheered their agreements around her.

A woman, loosening the buttons of her blazer, slid into the bar stool next to Kutone. “Rogue PG, right?” the woman giggled. “Even I had to stop by the Indie Hub this year, just for that keyboard!”

Along with the wrenching twist of familiarity dropping in her stomach, came a cold sweat down Kutone’s back. She shielded her face from view.

“Gimme a mule, Beats! And don’t pussyfoot me with the vodka, you know how I am!”

Beats guffawed in response, drawing a copper mug across to the new patron as he deftly threw ice,
vodka, ginger beer, and lime juice together. “Ha! Snake Eyes and Dancing Queen here together for
the first time in five years! Yo, Things! Turn it up!”

The woman next to Kutone pulled back in astonishment. “’Snake Eyes?’”

She turned, at the same time Kutone held her breath. “Kutone?!”

Kutone, sighing, pulled her hand down to her drink. The beat dropped harder, churning the dance
floor into a festival of bouncing bodies. She took a deliberate sip, then turned to meet the other’s
eyes. “Hi, Jaci.”

Jaci, the best friend from college, who stared at Kutone with wide green eyes made dull and dark
under the club’s strobe lights. She hadn’t changed at all in the three years since their last encounter at
Joa, maybe except for the makeup-veiled exhaustion weighing her eyes down. Yet, under the
colored lights of Beats ‘n Things, Jaci’s luxurious waves and sweeping lashes danced like laughter
on the wind. The eternal party girl, though she’d traded her raggedy jean shorts and crop top for
blazers and low-cut blouses.

“God,” Jaci huffed, cupping her chin into a manicured hand, “You finally found something to fit that
country girl aesthetic, huh?”

Same dismissive tone. Yet unlike their college days, when Kutone glanced away and bore the weight
of Jaci’s judgmental expression, she leveled a neutral, unapologetic gaze. “More like it was waiting
for me this entire time.”

The sparkling bangle on Jaci’s wrist rattled against the countertop, as she sighed and raked her other
hand through her thick hair. “I read that. Your old grandpa left it in your name or something like
that? Lucky bitch, aren’t you?”

“You always said that about me.”

A circling light caught the glitter of her eye shadow, as Jaci’s features twitched into a slight smile.
The beat threatened to muffle the meekness of her words. “How’ve you been, Toné?”

“How’ve you been, Toné?”

“Good as I can be, I guess.”

Just a few years ago, the same two girls sitting in the same two seats giggled and drank and danced
like destined soul sisters. They were roommates and friends, shoulders to cry on and back-to-back
supporters. Signs of the cracks between them had always been visible though, or at least, audible, in
Jaci’s attitude.

Country girl.

Lucky bitch.

Cheating skank.

To Kutone, this current image of her and Jaci sitting at the bar and staring at their drinks, made
perfect sense. She harbored no ill will, not anymore, for Jaci’s past treatment. At the same time, she
found no desire or temptation to continue their conversation.

It was Jaci, drumming her nails on the countertop, that pushed on. “Started coming here more often
since you left. Nostalgia, y’know?”

Kutone shrugged. “Bitter pill to swallow.”
“You still haven’t cheered up at all, huh?”

“It’s not a bad thing.” Kutone gazed down at the blank screen of her phone. “People accept me, Jace.”

Jaci sipped on her mule, and between two fingers, smudged the lipstick off her straws. “Did your new boyfriend say that, or are you telling yourself like it’s some mantra?”

Right. Jaci would already know. She’d been Demetrius’s tip, after all. The screen lit up with a new notification: Sebastian, texting, “finally free. omw.” Having Jaci meet him would be a damn good “fuck you” to set her straight, but Kutone’s creeping apprehension pulled her back from petty revenge. Jaci wasn’t worth her dignity. “New boyfriend,” she said. She swiped aside Sebastian’s new message. “He’s good to me.”

Jaci rolled her eyes. “What about you to him? Don’t tell me he doesn’t know about Rhei.”

“He’s met Rhei.”

“And that you whored around after Rhei tossed you aside?”

“After I tossed him aside,” Kutone corrected. “I cheated on him, Jace. I took out my anger by whoring around. And yes, new boyfriend also knows you were the one that started the rumor mill.”

“He doesn’t know you put yourself in that position.”

“Sure he does. I told him everything I could.”

“Then what a fucking dumbass,” Jaci snorted. “He knows you’re a broken piece of shit and he still hangs around? How’s that any different from the other people you threw out?”

Kutone’s hand snapped out before her words, seizing Jaci by her shoulder. “Say what you want about me,” said Kutone, “but don’t talk like you know him.”

Jaci ducked out from the crushing vicegrip and rolled her shoulder. “Fuck, fine, I get it, you’re right. I’m sorry for shitting on your new life.”

She doesn’t mean a single word of that, thought Kutone, turning back to her drink. But that was Jaci: a constantly angry mass who never understood the beauty of white marbling black into gray. A good thing associated with a bad thing was by definition a bad thing. In the case of their friendship, whatever wasn’t Jaci’s was Kutone’s, and whatever was Kutone’s deserved a nasty spitball. To think, that had once been funny to Kutone…

Sound funneled out Beats ‘n Things as the door swung open, then gently compressed back inside as the door closed. Hood up and eyes down, shoulders tense and breath held, he wove through the crowd. Only when he surfaced from the dance floor and landed at the bar next to Kutone, did Sebastian finally breathe.

He met Kutone’s blinking stare with a small smile. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Kutone replied, then leaned over the bar to yell down the countertop. “Beats, hand me a water please!”

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Uh, should we…?”

A curious Jaci peered over Kutone. Realization slowly dawned in her features, and into the gradual
“oh” of her lips. She cast a hurried glance from Sebastian to Kutone, then back again before she dropped her voice to an audible yet inconspicuous volume. “You were the one on the keyboard!”

Exhaustion blew out of Sebastian in a heavy breath, but he squared his shoulders and shrugged. “I was. You listened?”

Jaci hummed in approval, before sliding off her stool and pivoting behind Kutone. Leaning against her back, Jaci pulled a pensive expression. “‘Mermaid Queen,’ right? Such a pretty tune—you guys blew out the rest of the performances in the Hub with that one!”

“Thanks.”

Ignoring Kutone’s warning glare, Jaci leaned low for a glimpse under Sebastian’s hood. “Oh, and you’re pretty on top of that! No wonder the kids here kept screaming about you, huh? Honestly, you’re kind of a waste on this steel-cold sister of mine.”

Sebastian drew back, but leveled a confused expression toward Kutone. “Should I know this person?”

The ice in Kutone’s glass clinked as she took another draught. “Jaci,” was all she needed to say, for Sebastian to nod in understanding.

“God, still so bad at introducing me to your folks, aren’t you?” Jaci tossed her wavy hair over her shoulder, and leaned harder against Kutone. “Me and her? We’re so close we’re like, the shadow of the other.”

“Toxically so,” said Kutone, earning Sebastian’s alarmed stare and Jaci’s ugly smirk.

Yet beyond that, Jaci hardly flickered. “We were catching up,” she said. “I mean, we used to hang out here all the time. In fact,” Jaci swept her arm across the venue, “this is where we met Rhei! Remember that, Kutone?”

She noted the uncomfortable shift in Sebastian’s posture, as he turned his shoulder against Jaci’s investigating eyes. “Like yesterday,” Kutone replied, and finished the rest of her drink. “Jace, I should get going—!”

Jaci dug her knuckles into the small of Kutone’s back. “No, stay! It’s been so long, I want to catch up and get to know your new boy toy here!” She began waving down Beats. “Drinks are on me; we have to celebrate that performance anyway!”

Sour apples could never be redeemed, Kutone thought, as Sebastian tried next. “We already had an arrangement. And I don’t drink.”

“All this, and Jaci had yet to ask for Sebastian’s name. Was this truly the roommate she called her best friend back in college? Those days seemed like ancient history. Then again, bitter nostalgia had always been Jaci’s favorite flavor, and rumor mills her well-oiled engine. And… there it was, the headache that always accompanied a conversation with Jaci.

Sebastian buried his hands into his pocket. “I’m figuring her out bit by bit,” he said. “It’s been fun so far.”

Jaci let the cold copper of her mule hover by her lips. “Sure,” she said, “it’s fun with Toné, at least
until she leaves you for something else.”

*And so the Jaci Sabotage begins, huh?* “Sour apple” had been too nice. “Rotten” suited her better.

“That’s how this one always functions,” Jaci went on. “She nets herself a sweet, pretty novelty, plays around with them for a little while, gets bored, then dumps them for the next toy.”

In Kutone’s opinion, the effort of hooking herself to this bait wasn’t worth arguing against Jaci’s rationale. She hoped Sebastian would wipe that incredulous look from his face soon. Even if he were astounded by Jaci’s lack of reserve, Jaci would only assume her own victory.

“She said she told you about Rhei, right? That means you know what she did to him.”

Despite his expression, Sebastian’s tone dipped into unamusement. “And that you ran around saying she’d slept her way up her position.”

Ah, her man was the best.

“Look,” said Jaci, “I’m not about to deny what I did wrong. I own it. Every time someone brings it up, I make sure I admit my responsibility. See? I started that rumor. I made Kutone lose her job, and I’m really sorry about it.”

More like fishing for brownie points, than admitting her own responsibility. From Jaci’s tone, this was the story she proudly paraded around. *Look what I did! Look how I’m atoning for it! And look who’s probably not forgiving me!* Typical, unsurprising, unchanging Jaci.

“Say, Toné,” Jaci continued, “did you ever go back and apologize to the people you fucked around with? Or did you just walk away from them?”

“I apologized,” Kutone answered, “then walked away.”

“You see what I mean? Cold steel heart. No remorse whatsoever, not even thinking about the feelings of the person she leaves behind. You think you’ll be spared the heartbreak when she does it to you?”

For a moment, as a triumphant Jaci finished off her mule, and the beats of the club pumped through the walls and floor and colored cold drinks, Sebastian remained totally silent, staring at the floor. Then, chuckling, he shook his head. “I do,” he finally said. “You call yourself Kutone’s best friend, but, I get this weird feeling I’ve got you beat at that game.”

“Excuse me?”

Sebastian turned to Kutone. “You haven’t said anything, right, because you don’t feel the need to justify yourself anymore.”

She grinned in response.

“Naïve as the thought is,” Sebastian continued. “I like to think she’ll never leave me behind.”

“Talk about needing a reality check. Look at me!” Jaci spread her arms. “I thought we were best friends and she left me behind in everything we did together! Better grades, better connections, better family situation, better job entry level—you were supposed to have my back and then you left me behind in the dust! And now, you’re gonna come back, established *vintner* of all fucking things, with a goddamn boyfriend you apparently haven’t even thought about cheating on, and expect me to not want to warn him about you?!”
This was a new tirade. Kutone could only watch, wide-eyed, as Jaci crumbled before her eyes.

“You never stopped to turn around and make sure I was okay! You just assumed I’d be following you no matter what, and you know what? You were right! You were goddamn fucking right, and I fucking hate that you strung me on for as long as you did!

“So take notes, Boyfriend. It’s only a matter of time before she leaves you behind too, and you can’t come crawling back to me and cry about not getting any warnings. She did it with Rhei, she did it with me, she did it with everyone who ever thought they loved her!”

Confronting these accusations from Jaci in-the-raw was rather enlightening. “You thought I left you behind?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t.”

“I won’t.” Saying she never had any intention would probably only piss her off even more. Kutone abstained from saying anything else, other than, “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t even know what you’re apologizing for!”

“I made you feel lonely,” said Kutone. “I made you think I wasn’t supporting you, that I was pushing forward without taking you with me. In a sense, you’re right.”

She went on through Jaci’s scoff. “Look at us. I’ve run off to take up my grandfather’s estate, and you’re working your way up through the company, aren’t you? Neither of us thought we’d be taking these two totally different paths.”

“So what’s so ‘in a sense’ about it? Where am I wrong in this picture?”

“What you feel is not my fault. The fact you misunderstood me so completely, and judged me only by what I had versus what you didn’t? That’s not my fault.”

“Excuse you?!?”

Kutone slid out of her stool, Sebastian catching her by her back as she adjusted her jacket. Reaching into an inside pocket, she took out her wallet. Pulled out a bill, and taking Jaci’s hand, laid it flat on her palm.

“What the hell is this?”

“You said drinks were on you, right? It’s my share of the bill.”

“I said they were on me for a reason—!”

“—I don’t want to owe you anything else, Jaci.” Kutone turned around and walked away, Sebastian next to her. She lifted a hand in farewell. “Have a good evening.”

In silence, Kutone and Sebastian strolled along the sidewalk of the university district. Crowds gathered in front of neon-lit clubs, bouncers filtering patrons in after ID checks or entrance fees. Mists of cologne and perfume passed as streaks of tittering girls and gallivanting boys, along with the ambient wafts of alcohol on the breath.

Sebastian, arm linked with Kutone’s, grimaced, earning Kutone’s laugh. “You’re right,” she said. “I much prefer your cigarettes to this.”
“I’m quitting, so, I hope you enjoy coffee just as much.”

They rounded a corner and emerged onto a far quieter strip. Reddish orange lamps lit their way, as they huddled together against the autumn chill. “So,” Sebastian started, “that was Jaci.”

Since leaving Beats ‘n Things, they’d hardly hinted at the event. Truly, it was about time for Sebastian to have mentioned something, but, Kutone reasoned, he’d probably struggled to find the words to begin. Kutone herself was still baffled by the encounter. “She had her reasons.”

Kutone directed Sebastian down another street, as Sebastian, assuming himself clear of new roguepg fans, shook his hood free. “Did you really do wrong by her?”

“In her eyes—?”

“—In yours, Kutone. You actually feel guilty about her?”

“In a sense. After Rhei picked me up, I fell completely out of touch with Jaci. Something about her had always bugged me I guess, so I stopped talking to her. Even more so when I realized she’d sabotaged my work. But…” Kutone stopped in her tracks, jerking Sebastian to a stand-still with her. “Now that we’re here, I really think that was a good thing for me.”

A warehouse-like building stood in front of them. Gates closed and front lights glaring, a visitor clearly needed a key to get inside, but all Sebastian and Kutone had to do, was wait until tomorrow, for a viewing appointment with the building’s landlady.

“Here, huh?” Sebastian breathed. “You said it was close to the university district so I was worried it was kind of a loud spot, but… false alarm, I guess.”

“I’d still be careful,” Kutone replied, chuckling. “Drunk college kids are even stupider than drunk adults.”

“Point taken.” In the dissipation of the lights, Sebastian’s smile beamed. “Loft-style, right? That means…”

“Huge open space. High ceilings, lots of windows, maybe a balcony if you’re lucky.”

“I’ll probably need to get room-darkening curtains then.”

“Then you’d be missing the point of this building.”

“I’m kidding.” He nudged her into a walk again, as his smile faded. “When I move out here, I’ll have to be careful of Jaci.”

Toxic cancers like Jaci had a persistent tendency to continue their sabotage, but Kutone shook her head. “She doesn’t have it in her to try killing you, at least. And were she to come to that point, she knows I’d crush her in a fight.” Their footsteps scuffed along the sidewalk. “No, Sebby. You just have to keep being you. Keep living the life you want. And keep me updated too.”

“Making up with her is completely off the table, then?”

“Completely. There’s no salvation for a person who only counts her curses.” Then, nodding, she drew in a sharp breath. “I quit Jaci and everything she everything she ever represented to me.”

“Hey…”

“But I thank her too.” Releasing Sebastian from her side, Kutone veered around in front of him, and
wrapped her arms around him. “Without Jaci being Jaci, we wouldn’t be here now.”

Sebastian returned her embrace. “Tell me,” he started, “how I get to see things the way you do.”

“You live, I guess. You live, you look, you learn, you let go.” She craned her head up, just in time for Sebastian to press his lips and nose against her forehead.

“You make it sound so easy.”

“That’s because you’re already good at them, Sebastian. All you have to do now, is keep going.”
Two years away from the Valley felt like fifteen had passed in the city. How Kutone had ever lived with the constantly busy flow, Sebastian could never figure out. And he’d asked her on multiple occasions, during those long silent, static moments across their phones or computer screens, on nights he found himself wishing he could reach through the glass and chips and cyberspace to touch her. Sometimes, in video calls, her feed failed, or her spotty connection forced her to shut off her camera, leaving Sebastian with only her voice to comfort him. On bad days, like when storms tore through the valley and destroyed phone and computer connections, he survived long weekends without Kutone’s voice to warm him, and it was only on those days that he, for the first time in a long while, shivered from the cold.

Which was the most likely reason why, on the winter day he’d promised to go back home for vacation, Sebastian was dialing Kutone’s number and adjusting his earpiece. In the middle of work.

He counted four peals of the dial tone, until a click cut them off, followed by Kutone’s voice. “Hey.” That croak in her voice meant she’d just woken up. “Didn’t we just talk last night?”

Hiding his smile, he scrolled and clicked through lines of script, as he replied, “Maybe. I kind of remember someone falling asleep on me in the middle of our call.”

“Gee, I wonder who that could have been.”

“Did I wake you up?”

“Yes, but, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Silver-tongued as ever.”

“You know you like it.”

He could never deny that. “I’m thinking,” Sebastian started instead, “I can be home by dinner tonight.”

“Okay. Meet at the Saloon? It is Friday.”

“No… we can do the Saloon next week.”

Out of the corner of his eye, and thanks to the gray light streaming through the open blinds of the window, Sebastian recognized the bemused, mischievous grin of his desk partner. Teeth about as blinding as the thick lenses of his glasses, Noah always seemed to pop up at the same exact time Sebastian’s line connected with Kutone. And of course, thanks to those same glasses, Noah’s sharp eye always caught Kutone’s name on Sebastian’s phone.

Before, Sebastian knew, embarrassment would have choked him. Recently, however, he’d learned to
Cables shook Noah as Sebastian hurled a pen in his partner's direction. "Is fried rice simple enough?"

"Seafood, I'm guessing?"

"I'm serious when I say I don't want to trouble you."

"I know. But I'd have to leave now—Willy's actually selling out lately."

"That's fine. I'll come straight home."

"Don't keep me waiting."

Those were her tapering words, in place of I love you and as though she were whispering it in his ear, before she hung up.

Despite the monitors blocking his view, Noah still laughed. "Man, must be nice, having your girl cook your dinner."

"I'd help if I could."

"And you still ain't put a pendant on her?"

It was the one thing Noah could say that still made Sebastian sheepish. Pendant. Marriage. A future together. It seemed so right, and yet, he still wondered if he'd become a good enough partner for Kutone. Moving out to the city on his own, making friends with his colleagues, even heading out downtown for late-night snacks and drinks—he'd come a long way out of his shell. And for Kutone's sake? Coffee had nearly completely replaced cigarettes, phone conversations were easier for him to hold, and he was always available for her. Or at least, he made a point of telling her as much, in those off-chances she desperately needed him.

He liked to think he'd become his own version of well-rounded, but Kutone, he knew, must have matured on her own as well. There really was no catching up to her, but the thought of her ever moving forward always inspired Sebastian—someday, maybe, he'd finally be able to match her pace, and stand on her level. Mature. Confident. Imbued with a special kind of grace that made him smile no matter what happened around him.

Little did he know, of course, that it was that same grace that allowed him to shrug off his hesitation, and reply, "You're the one always preaching about men being good for their partners. And clearly, she's too good for me."

"Bad habit, my man. Bad habit. When a lady loves you enough she can let you go on your own, and wait for you back home—when you know a good woman like that trusts you so deeply you can stick out a long time without seeing her face-to-face, it means you're good for her too."

Sebastian stopped mid-throw of another pen. "I'm good for her too?" He lowered his arm, instead spinning the pen between his fingertips. "You really think so?"

Noah ran his fingers between his cornrows. "What have I been trying to tell you the entire time you've been working here, Seb?"

"That if it weren't for me you'd have made a move on Kutone by now." With a quick flick of his wrist, he catapulted the pen end-over-end across the desk. And quick reflexes had never been Noah's
friend. The pen smacked him square in the face. “You’re not really her type though.”

“Yoba Almighty, Sebastian, you might as well have taken that pen and stabbed it into the old open wound that is my heart.”

“You’ll live. My best friend’s living proof.”

“What the hell kind of torture do you put him through?”

“Nothing permanent.” Sebastian leaned back in his chair, and flipped another pen between his fingers. “That’s why he’s my best friend.”

Honestly, he sort of missed Sam. Between getting together for gigs in the city, and practice sessions over video calls, Sebastian had a severe lack of Sam that no new friend could fill. Even Sam had lamented as much. Sure, the band’s charismatic leader had met some new connections through mixtape forums, but—in his own words—“still no genius like you, pal.”

But in Sebastian’s thoughts, it was less about genius, and more about duality. No one else could take his synthesized chords and add words, harmony, and bassline like Sam could. No one else could concoct a story with Sebastian in music, could convince him to start singing as a surprise secret art, the way Sam could. If a shadow made up the volume of a presence, then light made up the visible surface, and Sam was always that light.

He really missed that sunny dork, almost as much as he missed Kutone.

Stopping the twirl of the pen between his fingers, Sebastian stared at the ceiling. He absently followed the trails of dots across each panel, as his thoughts wandered between his thoughts: his best friend, their music, his girlfriend, marrying her… “Noah,” said Sebastian, “any idea if there’s a remote position opening up?”

“If there isn’t, I’m sure Sadie will happily open one up for you.”

“To get rid of me?”

“To claim her best coder’s a stay-at-home dad.”

Every reason Sebastian wanted to argue went through his head at once. Best coder? Who said he’d stay at home? He was open to doing business trips—he’d already done a few of those for intercompany projects. And “dad”? What happened to even marrying Kutone in the first pl—god, that concept alone made him visibly rosy, evidenced by Noah’s knowing grin.

Instead, Sebastian walled himself behind his computer screen to avoid the shine of Noah’s teeth. “I guess I’ll talk to Sadie, then.”

In those same two years, a well-meaning but insensitive mother had warned Kutone, “If a man makes you wait, it means you’re too good for him.” Recently, Nagisa texted this practically every week, lately shortening her self-coined proverb to, “Remember: if he makes you wait…”

In the text Kutone got after she finished dinner preparations, Nagisa had narrowed that down even further to a curt, “Two years?!”

And Kutone was good at unpacking texts. Having someone as self-contained as Sebastian helped with that sort of thing. Her short-sighted mother meant a few things at the same time: “it’s been two
years and he’s still making you wait?” and “it’s been two years, Daddy and I met him and we like him well enough, and still nothing?” and—again, Kutone knew Nagisa truly meant well, but Mother Dear had the cutthroat, abrasive businesswoman personality that made her insinuate—“how low are you willing to stoop for a man, young lady!”

At this point, Kutone thought as she chucked her phone onto the coffee table, she was on bended knee. And if things went well tonight, that could be literal. Sauntering into the kitchen, with its set table and lidded, warmed pots on the stove, she ran her fingers down the spirals of a blue auger shell in her jacket pocket. Smooth and glassy to the touch, the shell just about tangibly shined its iridescence. A part of Kutone worried Sebastian would see the pendant glimmering through the fabric, causing her to instinctively—and gingerly—clasp her fist around the shell.

She leaned against her kitchen counter and scuffed the floor with the toe of her sock. She hadn’t rehearsed any part of this, and it seemed too late to practice now. But with one ear trained outside for the purrs of a motorcycle engine, she tried anyway.

When she met with the Mariner again, he’d mentioned the most important thing was to “be true.” “The reason ye ain’t drownin’ stars no more,” his spectral voice had rumbled, “is coz ye know it ain’t no use. What starts there in that golden heart o’ yours, now ye gotta be sure to let it out to him.”

Be true… and there Kutone’s mind drew a blank.

Truthfully? She for sure wanted to give the pendant to Sebastian. And… that was it. People in Stardew Valley grew up knowing the nuance of a blue auger shell, Robin had oh-so-conspicuously noted. Did they do it, however, with some speech and a soap-opera style “I love you?” Could she wordlessly do it, like, sneak it into Sebastian’s pocket and have him discover it later? God, if that wasn’t sappy either!

“He’s become divine in ye eyes, ain’t he? All ye gotta do is tell him that.”

She’d stared at the pendant the ghost handed her, while rain pelted her and the sand at her feet. “You must have received this from someone,” she mused. “Is that what they did for you? Become divine?”

The Mariner’s laugh was jovial, nostalgic. Endearing. “’M’afraid you and I can’t connect there. She’d always been divine for this old seadog. I s’pose I ain’t realized it ‘til she asked me to keep that there shell safe, ‘til I could pass it on to a worthy next.”

The clicks of claws on the flooring ticked toward her, and ended with a nuzzle and excited pant against her leg. Kutone knelt to Oki, and massaged around the scruff of his neck. Happily whining, Oki let his tongue loll out as he closed his eyes. “Oki,” Kutone mused, “what’s your take? Would you let Sebastian become your dad?”

Better yet, would he even take it? During those vacations Kutone took out to the city, when she stayed with Sebastian in his loft apartment rather than showing up on her parents’ doorstep, she’d seen the life Sebastian had carved out for himself. He was vibrant, happy even, in his own subdued way, to show her the new appliances, decorations, clothes, and coffee beans he’d purchased on his own. He’d even gotten way better in the kitchen—news that plunged Robin into a proudly (yes, he called me asking for the recipe!) existential (oh my lord above sebby can do that now? really? without me?) crisis when Kutone reported back.

Marrying him would take him away from that independent life.

She dropped her hands from Oki’s fur. This thing she was about to ask him—was it the right thing to do? Was it right by Sebastian? If he was kind, gentle enough to say “yes,” would he be saying it out
of pity for her? Would she bind him to a place he didn’t even want to stay?

No, Kutone thought. *He’s all grown up now. He can stand up for himself. He can say no, and I won’t even trip.*

The slowing hum of an engine drew closer toward the house. Kutone’s body moved before her thoughts, releasing her fist from the pendant and launching her into a leap at the door. Oki pranced out of her way, as she threw up her hood and yanked the front door open. She cleared the front porch’s steps in one jump, and dashed through the drifting snow around the corner of the house, to the small clearing they’d allocated for the bike.

Sebastian, after removing his key from the ignition, had barely gotten off when Kutone slammed into him. He steadied himself before they could topple over the motorcycle, as well as the rush of his breath leaving him, by wrapping his arms around her. “Kutone,” he wheezed, “Good grief, Kutone, it’s not like you never visited me.”

“No,” said Kutone. Face still pressed against his chest, she turned her gaze up to meet his eyes. “But you’re home.”

He was speechless for a few moments. Then, pressing a kiss against Kutone’s forehead, he smiled. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m home.”

Then, jumping at Kutone’s sudden shiver, he chuckled. “Let’s get inside. Snow’s soaking your socks.”

It sure was. Somehow, she’d forgotten her slip-on shoes before she ran out into the snow.

She stared awhile at her wet socks, as Sebastian wove his fingers between hers and guided her back to the house.

A skeevy song she used to listen to once claimed, “the body never lies.” Now, finally, she’d experienced the true nuance of those lyrics: the rush of her body launching into action, before her mind in its tumultuous circle-running could interrupt. The sharp focus of her objective, to see Sebastian, so concentrated that she’d forgotten essentials like shoes, coat, or hat. The wave that spiraled from her chest, shot up her spine, flared her body alive—these all made her uncertain musings irrelevant.

The simple fact was, she couldn’t live without him. Not anymore.

After dinner, they sat together on the sofa, Sebastian with a mug of coffee, Kutone with tea. Their low conversation from the table continued as the fire in the hearth crackled, even as Oki ambled by for toe rubs against his sides. No Stardrop Saloon tonight, they decided, because Sebastian’s vacation gave him enough time for Sam to mercilessly pester him, and both were content with their indoor moods. No TV, because its white noise would kill the vibe, neither electrifying enough for sex, nor wholesomely fluffy enough for cuddling. There was something to be preserved in the warm droning static of the air between them, a certain timelessness that came about only when they were together, at home.

Sebastian tapped his fingertips against the ceramic of his mug, as Kutone took another sip of her tea. “I’ve been wanting to tell you,” he started. Kutone cast him an inquisitive glance. “It’s nothing to worry about. Just… it’s hard.”

Her head filled the rest of his thoughts. *It’s hard to keep up this relationship while I’m out there…*
Something like that. Dread lurched in Kutone’s stomach. Cold sweat flared down her back, but she bit back the self-defensive snark that threatened to interrupt him.

He seemed to sense it. “Seriously. It’s nothing to worry about. I just…” Indecisiveness made him drum his fingers against his mug, and brightened the rosiness of his features. “I’m thinking about moving back. Here.”

She relaxed, hiding her relief with a sigh into her tea. “You never mentioned this.”

“It’s been on my mind. Like… It’s really, really nice to be home. Out there’s fine and all, making my life for myself. It’s just… not the same.”

Kutone bit her lip. “You coming back here,” she started, chuckling, “is, by far, the most I can ask for right now. Believe me.” Concern knitting her brow, she reached over and grasped his wrist. Then his hand. “This might sound hugely unsupportive of me, but I know you’ve been working hard out there. Your position, your apartment, the friends you made—I may not entirely know from experience, but won’t it be hard, leaving all of that?”

Sebastian returned the squeeze of Kutone’s hand in his. “It’s a pragmatic way of thinking. So like you.” He stopped the tapping of his fingers. “But, let’s say, my job can arrange a remote position for me. And, let’s say, I promised I’d keep in touch with my friends, and let’s also say I could afford ending my lease term early.”

As Kutone stared into her mug, palpitations thrumming in her ears and in her chest, she could feel Sebastian’s careful gaze on her. “Then, let’s also say,” he continued, his voice soft, “I’ve been thinking a lot more about the future. About you. Me.”

She released her hand from his, and slipped it into her jacket pocket again. Curled her fingers around the spirals of the shell waiting patiently there. She was interpreting his hypothetical correctly, right? This, the nuance of this blue shell, is exactly what he meant, right? Was she jumping to conclusions? God forbid that, anything but that. She had to hear him out.

He let out an uncertain “um…” and stared down at his mug. “I’ve basically, totally quit smoking,” he said. “Though I guess, it really did become a coffee addiction. I’m a hell of a lot better at household chores. I’d still be able to work, so I could— I could help.” He sighed, exasperated. “Shit, I never thought this could be such a hard question…”

Kutone’s alarm decided upon the safe path: he was asking, she concluded, to move in with her. And he needed a little help. Her unplanned words started flowing. “I missed you,” she said, setting her mug on the coffee table. She turned to face him, even as Sebastian continued staring at the coffee in his mug. “I missed you like you wouldn’t believe.”

Do it, or regret not trying. Be true. She took Sebastian’s mug out of his hands, and set it on the coffee table as well. “Listen,” she started, “I’ll always support you, no matter what you choose to do with yourself. If you were asking about moving in with me, you already know how much I want to keep you here.”


“No. You don’t.”

At the moment Sebastian turned a baffled expression toward her, Kutone slipped her closed fist out of her pocket. She reached over and pressed her fist into his open hands. Released her hand. Let the weight fall into his palm.
As she pulled her hand back, allowing the firelight to illuminate the iridescent shine of the blue shell between Sebastian’s hands, Kutone held her breath. She watched, as Sebastian blinked down at the Mermaid’s Pendant.

“Wait…”

He drew a sharp breath. Widened his eyes and ran his fingers down the shell.

“Wait. Wait, wait, wait.”

He blushed furiously, his excited, embarrassed flush flaring up to his ears and even down his neck. Hands still around the shell, he tucked his head down, hiding his face from Kutone’s smile.

“You really—?! This isn’t? Is it?” He was breathless, voice teary. “Kutone, I was—I was thinking about this—I was supposed to give you this!”

She linked arms with him, and pressed her cheek against his shoulder. “But I beat you to it. So, this cute reaction of yours—does it mean…?”

“Yes! Yes it does! I do, I will, I accept—whatever the hell you want me to say about it, I’m saying it!” Keeping the shell in one hand, Sebastian, still red, still heated, practically threw himself around Kutone, reducing both of them to embarrassed, excited, hopeful laughs as they laid on the sofa. “Don’t ever tell Sam I acted like this.”

“Anything for you, my darling.”

“God, stop. I know how you are when you start talking like that.” Sebastian levered himself up, until he hovered over Kutone, arms up and hands wound behind his neck. “And you know Sam would never let me live it down.”

Kutone raised a brow. “And what about the moment you tell him you’re getting married? You think he’ll ever let you live that down?”

“I like to think I can delay the inevitable.”

“You’re so funny.” But, Kutone conceded, as Sebastian leaned down, allowing her to kiss his uncontrollable smile, he’d come a long way. He seemed freer, unburdened by whatever weight he used to drag around with him. Pride—because she liked to think she was part of his reason—glowed in her chest. \textit{Look}, she thought, \textit{I can be me and I can help the person I care most about in my life. I can do it too.}

Sebastian helped her sit up, as Kutone took the pendant from his hand. “Here,” she said, and wound the cord over and around his neck.

As the shell fell against his chest, Sebastian took it between his fingers again. “I’ll get you one too.”

Kutone reached under her shirt, hooked a finger around the cord of her necklace, and pulled out the rosy prism of her pendant. “You already did,” she replied, “once upon a spring.”

“That doesn’t count.”

“Even if it doesn’t to you, it does to me. The day you gave me this? You became mine, and I, yours.”
I get it now.

With each shifting crunch of snow under his heels, clarity dAWNed in Sebastian’s head. Clarity? You became mine, and I, yours. She made perfect sense. Then, reality hit him. Late as it was, he was on his way to his mother’s house, because in his head, there was no delaying news like, Mom I just got engaged.

He was still blushing, badly enough he still looked feverish in the winter night. Thanks to it though, he didn’t need scarf or hood to keep himself warm, like thinking about Kutone’s proposal alone—holy shit she proposed to him and they were engaged! Engaged!—was insulation enough. His breath was steam against the darkness, lit by stars like ice crystals in the sky.

But maybe this wasn’t normal, these palpitations that drummed faster the more he thought about Kutone, about the concept of a future with her. Not a dream, he told himself. The blue auger shell tucked underneath his shirt was his proof. None of this was a dream.

He tottered out of the backwoods road, to the clearing just behind his mother’s house. Robin would be back from her weekly dancing at the Saloon soon. With no keys to let himself into the house—a family oversight—he figured he could bum around by the lake until he heard her and Demetrius coming up the path. He needed the chance to calm down, anyway. Stop the world from spinning around him.

You’re overflowing.

A boy’s voice, a touch deeper, more gravelly, than Sebastian remembered, but still familiar. It spoke as though from within him, and yet, outside, whispering into his ear. He steadied himself against a tree by the lake. He licked his lips. Listened to the ripples across the lake’s surface, lapping against the low banks. A smoke, he thought, would do incredible wonders right now.

That’s why I can talk to you right now. You’re overflowing.

Sebastian clutched his new pendant. Overflowing with love or magic, he couldn’t quite grasp, but he appreciated the chance to chat with his oldest childhood friend. “How’ve you been?”

You almost let me out once, but since then the seal isn’t fun. I can’t move outside of it.

“That’s what it’s meant for.”

But I still heard everything. She gave you a promise.

“She did.”

You’re dizzy right now because of that.

“Like I’m drunk.”

Only because she gave you a powerful promise. She restored the harvest sprites’ blessings to the valley. I think, if you unsealed me, you might be able to control me now.

“Not testing that.”

That’s fine. I’ll keep listening. And I’ll think about how warm it is here.

“Here?”

It’s why I’m talking to you. There’s a seedling here for a great tree, but the dancer says it needs a
special water. I want to see it grow, so, I thought, while you’re overflowing with all this magic from her promise and the valley’s blessing, I’d tell you about it.

The yeti boy’s words couldn’t have been more enigmatic. Special water for a seedling? Sebastian’s thoughts were more focused on just how he’d tell his mother about the coming course of his future.

Above, the pinpricks of starlight flickered. Trembled. A prickly stillness set in over the mountaintop. Shudders chilling against the nape of his neck, Sebastian, without understanding exactly what compelled him, stared wide at the stars as he crept to the lakeside.

A final twinkle pulsed across the sky.

Then, with the sound of chiming crystals, the stars fell.

The stars.

Fell.

Streaks of light followed them down from the sky, and instead of crashing into a cloud of dust against the ground, the stars shattered into nebulae of prismatic shards, their sound like a music box melody. Only gentle puffs of wind signaled their landing, as they bathed the mountaintop in blooms of starlight before settling into nothingness among the dirt. In front of him, behind him, along the surface of the lake, even against the roof of his mother’s house, the stars fell in a dazzling lights show that seized Sebastian’s breath as he watched, mouth half-open in awe.

Kutone needs to see this, he thought, at the same time a door crashed open in the yard behind the house. Steps churned in the snow in a flurrying patter. A pause.

“Seb…? Sebastian?” Maru’s delight shined in her words, as she closed the rest of the distance between her and her brother. “When’d you get back?”

She’d grown a little taller, Sebastian observed. Hair a little longer, and in gentle waves. Maybe she’d finally given up straightening it so much. But she still wore her dorky round spectacles, a perfect mirror for the colors glittering around them. “A few hours ago,” Sebastian replied. “Sorry. I was with Kutone.”

Maru kept watching the falling stars, as she smiled. “That’s not something to apologize for. If you’d come here first before going to her, I would have kicked you right out the house.”

“How supportive of you.”

“You know it, dearest Brother of mine.” She turned in place, and clasped her hands together. “I knew the meteor shower would be starting soon, but I’ve never seen it like this! It’s like space is celebrating! And because matter can never be destroyed…” She crouched and gathered a handful of dirt. Flecks of light glittered in the dust, like faceted jewels. “It’s like the stars are becoming part of the earth. Watering it! Dad’s gonna want a sample of this!”

While Maru knelt again and started gathering dirt into vials—part of a convenient field study kit she’d strapped to her side—Sebastian’s thoughts snagged on Maru’s statement.

Luckily, the other boy agreed. *But how do we get those stars in here?*

Then he remembered, an old fortuneteller had once told him, “I see you catching one of those falling stars…”
He looked up, and sighted one trembling star in the sky. Somehow, Sebastian already knew its trajectory. Fate, maybe, or coincidence, or the tug in his chest that goaded him toward it. A tug that held Kutone’s sheepish expression when she first handed him the pendant. A tug that wished she were here to watch this meteor shower with him, that somehow realized he could bring a piece of it back to her.

Maru’s warning shout barely reached him, as Sebastian stepped onto—onto!—the water. The star he watched shuddered. Plummeted, a trail of prismatic light following it as it hurtled toward the earth. And he was on the water, sheets of ice fanning from his steps, and the surreal feeling of being in two places at the same time, like a part of himself had gone outside of his body and followed him over his shoulder, and stared also at the falling star, that one they both claimed as theirs.

His sister’s shout became an awed catch of her breath.

Sebastian raised one hand.

The star crashed and shattered weightlessly in his cupped palm, sending showers of light scattering around him and across the lake. A warmth bloomed in his chest, as the flare of the star shimmered, danced, spun, and wrapped itself into a familiar shape, five points fleshed out into a plump purple fruit, twin leaves unfurled.

To Sebastian, it smelled like a fresh hot mug of coffee on a rainy morning, or the sweet must of old dusty books, maybe a hint of the metallic scent of chrome and the sharp pungence of gasoline, but mostly, like juniper and honeyed orange blossoms in violet hair.

He wondered, staring at the Stardrop in his hand and grasping his pendant in the other, what Kutone would taste.
Like any other summer in Stardew Valley, the humidity prickled even in the shade, even as the last tendrils of twilight faded over the horizon. Through the open curtains of the kitchen window, Kutone watched the settle of the hazy sunset, as she lifted an infuser stuffed with honeyed cranberries from an ice-cold pitcher of apple juice. She dumped the fruits into the juice, added ice, and stirred the reddening blend with a wooden spoon. Then, taking two glasses and a bottle with a pop-up spout from a cabinet, she poured three helpings of cranberry candy.

Now for the taste tests.

To one glass, she added a sprinkle of sugar, just enough to enhance the honey she spooned in from the jar. Her husband preferred the bitter tang of the cranberries, but he appreciated a dash of balancing sweetness. To the bottle, she spooned in plenty of fairy rose honey, as well as a spoonful of sugar. 3-year-old Darius, after all, liked his cranberry candy as exactly that—cranberry candy. Kutone clicked down the bottle’s spout, gave it a few good shakes, then set it and the two full glasses on a tray.

And just in time. Her boy’s excited squeaks and her dog’s snuffling yips echoed from her front porch. “Mama! Mama! C’mon, the stars! The stars!”

Sebastian’s stifled laughter answered in Kutone’s stead. “She won’t miss them, Darius. Just give her some time.”

“But, look, here, Daddy, see? A star!”

Sebastian said something about it being a firefly, and not a star, but Darius laughed. “Fires don’t fly!” And, Kutone reminded herself, hoping Sebastian would somehow catch her thoughts, “lightning bugs” wasn’t an appropriate term either, because, in Darius’s words, “Storms are scary and you can’t catch them.” And “bug” was such a funny word for something so pretty. Again, Darius’s wisdom.

Balancing her and Sebastian’s tray in one hand, Kutone held Darius’s bottle in the other as she made her way to the front door. With a light kick against the closed screen door, Kutone smiled. “Mama’s not missing the stars, Darius. Just help me out so I can see them!”

Clumsy steps leapt away from Sebastian and stumbled up the front porch, as Darius jumped up to grab the latch of the screen door. In the hazy twilight, the boy’s icy gray eyes shined like moonlight as he seized his drink. “Cranberry candy? Is it cranberry candy?”

“Take a sip and you’ll find out.”

Not that Darius, expectant eyes still glittering, needed any instruction. Playtime in the summer heat glossed the fringes of his midnight-violet hair with sheets of sweat, and filled his lightly bronzed features with a healthy rosiness. Her son was due for a haircut, Kutone thought, at least to spare him from the obstruction of a mop over his eyes during the summertime. It wouldn’t be long before he started complaining, anyway.

Darius pulled up the spout of his bottle, and guzzled down grateful swigs of his favorite drink, while Kutone sat down next to Sebastian on the veranda’s front steps. She handed him one of the ice-cold glasses on the tray. “One tart cranberry for the hubby?”
“Please and thank you.” Sebastian pressed a kiss onto Kutone’s cheek. “You always know what we need in this heat.”

“You didn’t say that about the barley tea.”


“Don’t make me take that cranberry candy away from you.”

Darius finally pulled the spout from his lips, scrubbed aside lingering droplets of cranberry candy, and grinned after a hiccup. “I’ll have it!”

Kutone smiled over the rim of her own glass of juice. “You wouldn’t like Daddy’s, because he doesn’t like anything sweet.”

“I do too,” huffed Sebastian.

Darius curled his lip. “Prove it!”

Triumph crossed Sebastian’s features in a sneer. “Your mother,” he said, drawing his arm around Kutone’s shoulders and planting another kiss on her cheek. “She’s the sweetest thing in the world.”

While Kutone internally grappled with Sebastian’s ability to say the things he said with a straight face, Darius snorted. “Nuh-uh. Mama made sweet gem berries! Those are sweet!”

Sebastian grimaced. “Alright, you win. I can feel the cavities already.”

Whooping, Darius skipped into the yard, where Oki joined him from among the summertime fields of wheat and corn. The wizened retriever had lost some of the pep in his step in the years since Darius arrived, but still happily spent his remaining play with his little brother. And Darius had never questioned Oki’s company.

“Look! Look! See? The stars!”

One by one, fireflies flared alive and then faded in slow twinkles. Barking at the view, Oki pranced about.

Sebastian tightened his embrace around Kutone’s shoulders. “I missed you today,” he said, planting yet another kiss on Kutone’s temple.

“You brought that on yourself,” Kutone snorted. “Besides, Darius helped out so much today. Even if you and I divorced, I’d be set on helping hands.”

Sebastian cast a suspicious side-eye. “You wouldn’t. Not from me.”

Kutone laughed. “You’re right. I wouldn’t. Not from you.” She put down her share of cranberry candy and nestled against Sebastian. “Did you get the time you needed for yourself?”

“I finished my projects for work,” Sebastian started. “Got some game development done. Took a walk out to Mom’s…”

At this, Kutone glanced up. “To the mountain? The lake, I’m guessing.”

“Yeah?”

“And you went to your favorite spot?”
Sebastian’s grip loosened with his uncertain reply. “Maybe?”

She pulled back, as Sebastian turned his face away. “Sebby,” started Kutone, “you haven’t kissed me since you got back.”

“Sure I did. Multiple times.”

Kutone took a fistful of Sebastian’s shirt, and turned him toward her. “Kiss me.”

Sebastian pursed his lips tight, and with a noncomplicit look, shook his head.

Snickering, she released him from her grip. “First smoke in a while, right? How was it?”

Defeat crossed Sebastian’s features. “Habit,” he mumbled. “I know it’s a bad habit, I really do.”

“I don’t blame you,” Kutone chuckled. “Darius is a lot more than we thought he’d be.”

“No! No, it’s not Darius, and don’t—even suggest it’s you.” He watched Darius and Oki play for a while longer, then shook his head again. “No. Having Darius, and having you, like this… You’re both blessings I don’t deserve.”

“You’re still saying that?”

“I still feel like I’m in a dream, you know.”

“I know.” Under both Kutone’s and Sebastian’s watchful eyes, Darius knelt at the edge of the riverbank, Oki dipping his snout into the water next to him. Fireflies illuminated small patches of the boy and his dog, as Kutone wove her fingers between Sebastian’s. They held tight. “I’m the same.”

The words hung like a soft blanket over their shoulders. Even as Darius stood up and waved back to his parents, as though wedging himself in between them, the airiness remained.

Until Sebastian scoffed. “The more I live this life,” he said, “the more selfish I get.”

“So you needed some time to yourself,” replied Kutone. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“You’re the one with the around-the-clock job. Maintaining the Banks? Being my wife? Being Darius’s mother? You don’t get ‘time to yourself.’”

“Sure I do.”

“Coffee dates with my mother and sister are family obligations, Kutone.” Heaving a sigh, he raked his free hand through his hair. “I’ve got to help you out more. I’m sorry.”

Kutone leaned her head on Sebastian’s shoulder. “You made dinner tonight.”

“That was nothing.”

“You were tired from work and you still played with Darius while I made the cranberry candy.”

“Well,” said Sebastian, “maybe I wanted to play with him.”

“You’re still here. You’re holding my hand, you’re watching Darius to make sure he doesn’t fall into the river, and you think you’re not helping me out?”

“Not like I should.”
“But that’s exactly what you’re doing.” She wound herself around Sebasitan’s arm. “This is my time
to myself, right here and now. And every little thing you do for me or Darius, helps me get this time.
You do more than you think, Sebastian.”

He shifted against her, his movement making the ice in his glass chime gently. Cranberry candy
somewhat muffled his voice. “I believe you. Legitimately.”

Her heart leapt, goading Kutone into holding her husband tighter. “Oh Papa,” she sighed, “you’re
stoic yet soft, bitter yet sweet, dismissive yet attentive, and Mama’s so happy she married you.”

Sebastian choked on his drink. Twilight thankfully hid most of his embarrassed flush, but the fireflies
still shined upon patches of his blush as he buried his face into the crook of his arm. “I thought you
couldn’t get any cornier…”

“You’re smiling.”

“Stop.”

“You’re blushing.”

“Kutone.”

“You’re so cute.”

“I will pour this over your head, Kutone.”

Kutone shrugged, crooning, “Showering with you is another bit of ‘time to myself,’ you know.”

“Yoba above…!”

He couldn’t win against her. This was something he knew well before marriage, yet he tried again
and again. His effort was endearing, to say in the least.

A peal of Darius’s laughter directed Kutone’s and Sebastian’s attentions back to him, Sebastian
coiling to jump to Darius’s aid. False alarm. With Oki lying on the ground next to him, Darius
reached up toward the fireflies, standing on tip-toe and fingers outstretched as though to touch every
star around him and in the sky. And the fireflies danced with him. Gleaming in the darkness,
Darius’s sunset stars formed a personal planetarium around him, and lit his way as he skipped from
one spot to the next.

Sebastian, relaxing, broke the awed silence first. “There’s something about him, don’t you think?”

“Something amazing,” Kutone agreed. “Something bright and beautiful.”

“That’s good,” said Sebastian. “You wished for something like that, when we found out you were
pregnant with him.”

She pressed a hand over her stomach, soft, stretched, and scarred skin hidden underneath her clothes.
Those days three, nearly four, years ago seemed like yesterday, when she warred with dizzying
nausea to wake her heavy body in the morning. She nodded once, and smiled. “What do you think it
is?”

Sebastian went quiet again, as he watched the fireflies twinkle around Darius. He watched the boy
catch those stars in his two hands, and release them back into the sky with a launching flourish.
Stardust seemed to drift from Darius’s hands, with each firefly he cast to the sky. Magic?
“He’s so alive,” Sebastian finally murmured. “Right?”

Kutone cupped her chin between her hands. A humid summer breeze rustled across the fields, but Darius, wiping sweat from his face, smiled into the wind. Like a careening spirit, the wind circled him—and Darius followed it with his eyes—until it rose into the sky and dissipated into a shower of fireflies sparkling beneath the bright, full moon.

“Alive,” Kutone echoed. “Like everyone and everything around him. Like the valley, like you… Like me.”

And that, she decided, was everything she could ask for.

Chapter End Notes

: )

You're at the end of A Drop Echoes in the Hollow.

I've been here for a couple of weeks, but it's still a surreal feeling. How are you guys doing?

And how'd you like the fic? It's been a wild ride to get to this point, if my erratic writing and posting were any indications. It's a lot better than the last time I attempted a mega fic like this... six years ago. Almost seven. That being said, any last critiques or comments? Post ’em now! This is the last installment of this fic, so you won't be seeing it on the first few pages anymore, especially once I start working on my next projects.

So head on over to my tumblr. Leave me an ask about anything you want! You can talk to my characters, talk to me, ask me about the upcoming works, anything you like! I will answer everything to the best of my ability.

I owe you all at least that much, as thanks for coming with me this far.

Seriously guys. Thank you.

Addition 7/20/2018: I have a postmortem up on Tumblr! My inbox is open to anon submissions, so please take a look and send me your thoughts!

Addition 7/22/2018: Believe it or not, this chapter started nothing like this! You want to see what I had before? Go take a look at this bonus bit!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!